After nearly eighteen months at Basgiath War College, Violet Sorrengail knows there's no more time for lessons.
No more time for uncertainty.

Because the battle has truly begun, and with enemies closing in from outside their walls and within their ranks,
it's impossible to know who to trust.

Now Violet must journey beyond the failing Aretian wards to seek allies from unfamiliar lands to stand with Navarre.
The trip will test every bit of her wit, luck, and strength, but she will do anything to save what she loves—her dragons, her family, her home, and him.

Even if it means keeping a secret so big, it could destroy everything.

They need an army. They need power. They need magic. And they need the one thing only Violet can find—the truth.

But a storm is coming…and not everyone can survive its wrath.

The Empyrean series is best enjoyed in order.

Chapter 1

Two weeks later

Flying in January should be a violation of the Codex. Between the howling storm and the incessant fog in my goggles, I can't see shit as we cut through the blustering snow squall above the mountains near Basgiath. Hoping we're almost through the worst of it, I grip the pommels of my saddle with gloved hands and hold tight.

"Dying today would be inconvenient," I say down the mental pathway connecting me to Tairn and Andarna. "Unless you're trying to keep me away from the Senarium this afternoon?" I've waited more than a week for the invitation-disguised order to come from the king's council, but the delay is understandable given they're on the fourth day of unprecedented peace talks happening on campus. Poromiel has publicly declared they'll walk after the seventh day if terms can't be reached, and it isn't looking good. I only hope that they'll be in an agreeable mood when I arrive.

“Want to make your meeting? Don’t fall off this time,” Tairn retorts.

“For the last time, I didn’t fall off,” I argue. “I jumped off to help Sawyer—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You can’t keep leaving me off patrols,” Andarna interrupts from the warmth and protection of the Vale.

“It isn’t safe,” Tairn reminds her for what has to be the hundredth time. “Weather aside, we’re hunting dark wielders, not out for a pleasure flight.”

“You shouldn’t fly in this,” I agree, looking for any sign of Ridoc and Aotrom, but there’s only walls of white. My chest tightens. How are any of us supposed to see topography or our squadmates, let alone spot a dark wielder hundreds of feet below in this mess? I can’t remember a more brutal series of storms than the ones that have battered the war college in the last two weeks, but without—

Mom. Grief sinks the tips of her razor-sharp claws into my chest, and I lift my face to feel the stinging bite of snow against the tops of my cheeks, focusing on anything else to keep breathing, keep moving. I’ll mourn later, always later.

“It’s just a quick patrol,” Andarna whines, jarring me from my thoughts. “I need the practice. Who knows what weather we’ll encounter on the search for my kind?”

“Quick patrols” have proven deadly, and I’m not looking for reasons to test Andarna’s fire theory. Dark wielders may have limited power within the wards, but they’re still lethal fighters. The ones who didn’t escape post-battle have used the element of surprise to add multiple names to the death roll. First Wing, Third Wing, and our own Claw Section have suffered losses.

“Then practice evenly dispersing enough magic to keep all your extremities warm during flight, because your wings won’t hold the weight of this ice,” Tairn growls into the falling snow.

“‘Your wings won’t hold the weight of this ice,’” Andarna blatantly mocks him. “And yet yours miraculously carry the burden of your ego.”

“Go find a sheep and let the adults work.” Tairn’s muscles shift slightly beneath me in a familiar pattern, and I lean forward as far as the saddle will allow, preparing for a dive.

My stomach lurches into my throat as his wings snap closed and we pitch downward, slicing through the storm. Wind tears at my winter flight hood, and the leather strap of my saddle bites

into my frozen thighs as I pray to Zihnal there isn't a mountain peak directly beneath us.

Tairn levels out, and my stomach settles as I tug my goggles up to my forehead and blink quickly, looking right. The drop in altitude has lessened the intensity of the storm, improving visibility enough to see the rocky ridgeline just above the flight field.

"Looks clear." My eyes tear up, assaulted by both wind and snow that feels more like tiny projectiles of ice than flakes. I clean my lenses using the suede tips of my gloves before snapping them over my eyes again.

"Agreed. Once we hear the same from Feirge and Cruth, we'll end today's endeavors," he grumbles.

"You sound like making it three straight days without encountering the enemy is a bad thing." Maybe we've really caught and killed them all. As cadets, we've slain thirty-one venin in the area surrounding Basgiath while our professors work to clear the rest of the province. It would be thirty-two if anyone suspected one of them was living among us, though—even if he's credited with seventeen of the kills.

"I am not comforted by the quiet—" Wind whips overhead with a crack, and Tairn's head jerks upward. Mine immediately follows suit.

Oh no.

Not wind. Wings.

Aotrom's claws consume my vision, and my heart seizes with panic. He's dropping out of the storm directly on top of us.

"Tairn!" I shout, but he's already rolling left, hurling us from our course.

The world rotates, sky and land exchanging places twice in a nauseating dance before Tairn flares his wings in a jarring snap. The movement cracks the inch-thick layer of ice along the front ridges of his wings, and chunks fall away.

I draw a full but shaky breath as Tairn pumps his wings with maximum effort, gaining a hundred feet of altitude in a matter of seconds and barreling straight toward the Brown Swordtail bonded to Ridoc.

Wrath scalds the air in my lungs, Tairn's emotions flooding my system for a heartbeat before I can slam my mental shields down to muffle the worst of what streams in through the bond.

“Don’t!” I shout into the wind as we come up on Aotrom’s left, but as always, Tairn does whatever he wants and full-on crunches his jaws within what looks like inches of Aotrom’s head. “It was clearly an accident!” One that would usually be avoided by dragons communicating.

The smaller Brown Swordtail squawks as Tairn repeats the warning, then Aotrom exposes his throat in a gesture of submission.

Ridoc looks my way through the band of snow and throws up his hands, but I doubt he sees my shrug of apology before Aotrom falls away, heading south to the flight field.

Guess Feirge and Rhi reported in.

“Was that really necessary?” I drop my shields, and Tairn’s and Andarna’s bonds come flooding back at full strength, but the shimmering pathway that leads to Xaden is still blocked, dimmed to an echo of its usual presence. The loss of constant connection sucks, but he doesn’t trust himself—or what he thinks he’ll become—to keep it open yet.

“Yes,” Tairn answers, declaring the single word sufficient.

“You’re almost twice his size and it was obviously an accident,” I repeat as we descend rapidly to the flight field. The snow on the ground of the box canyon has been trampled into a muddy series of paths from the constant patrols second- and third-years are flying.

“It was negligent, and a twenty-two-year-old dragon should know better than to close himself off from his riot simply because he’s arguing with his rider,” Tairn grumbles, his anger lowering to a simmer as Aotrom lands beside Rhi’s Green Daggertail, Feirge.

Tairn’s claws impact the frozen ground to Aotrom’s left, and the sudden landing vibrates every bone in my body like a rung bell. Pain explodes along my spine, my lower back taking the brunt of the insult. I breathe through the worst of it, then accept the rest and move on. “Well, that was graceful.” I jerk my goggles to my forehead.

“You fly next time.” He shakes like a wet hound, and I block my face with my hands as ice and snow fly off his scales.

I tug at the leather strap of my saddle when he stills, but the buckle catches along the jagged, shitty line of stitches I put in after the battle, and one of them pops. “Damn it. That wouldn’t have happened if you’d let Xaden fix it.” I force my body out of the saddle, ignoring the aching protest of my cold-cramped joints as I make my way across the icy pattern of spikes and scales I know as well as my own hand.

“The Dark One didn’t cut it in the first place,” Tairn responds.

“Stop calling him that.” My knee collapses, and I throw my arms out to steady my balance, cursing my joints as I reach Tairn’s shoulder. After an hour in the saddle at these temperatures, a pissed-off knee is nothing; I’m lucky my hips still rotate.

“Stop denying the truth.” Tairn enunciates every word of the damning order as I avoid a patch of ice and prepare to dismount. “His soul is no longer his own.”

“That’s a little dramatic.” I’m not getting into this argument again. “His eyes are back to normal—”

“That kind of power is addictive. You know it, or you wouldn’t be pretending to sleep at night.” He twists his neck in a way that reminds me of a snake and levels a golden glare on me.

“I’m sleeping.” It’s not entirely a lie, but definitely time to change the subject. “Did you make me repair my saddle to teach me a lesson?” My ass protests every scale on Tairn’s leg as I slide, then land in a fresh foot of snow. “Or because you don’t trust Xaden with my gear anymore?”

“Yes.” Tairn lifts his head far over mine and blasts a torrent of fire along his wing, melting off the residual ice, and I turn away from the surge of heat that painfully contrasts my body temperature.

“Tairn…” I struggle for words and look up at him. “I need to know where you stand before this meeting. With or without Empyrean approval, I can’t do any of this without you.”

“Meaning, will I support the myriad of ways you plan to court death in the name of curing one who is beyond redemption?” He swivels his head in my direction again.

Tension crackles along Andarna’s bond.

“He’s not—” I cut off that particular argument, since the rest is sound. “Basically, yes.”

He grumbles deep within his chest. “I fly without warming my wings in preparation for carrying heavier weight for longer distances. Does that not answer your question?”

Meaning Andarna. Relief gusts through my lips on a swift exhale. “Thank you.”

Steam rolls in billowing clouds from his nostrils. “But do not mistake my unflinching support of you, my mate, and Andarna for any form of faith in him.” Tairn lifts his head, cueing the end of the conversation.

“Heard.” On that note, I trudge toward the trampled path where Rhi and Quinn wait. Ridoc gives Tairn a wide berth as he does the same to my right. My nearly numb, gloved fingers fumble with the three buttons on the side of my winter flight hood, and the fur-lined fabric falls away from my nose and mouth as I reach them. “Everything good on your route?”

Rhi and Quinn look cold but uninjured, thank gods.

“Still…alarmingly routine. We didn’t see anything of concern. Wyvern burn pit is still just ash and bone, too.” Rhi picks a clump of snow from the lining of her hood, then pulls it back up over her shoulder-length black braids.

“We didn’t see shit for those last ten minutes, period.” Ridoc shoves his gloved hand into his hair, snowflakes slipping off his brown cheeks without melting.

“At least you’re an ice wielder.” I gesture to his annoyingly flake-free face.

Quinn pulls her blond curls into a quick bun. “Wielding can help keep you warm, too.”

“I’m not chancing it when I can’t see what I might strike.” Especially having lost my only conduit in the battle. I glance at Ridoc as a line of our Tail Section’s dragons launch for their patrol behind him. “What were you arguing with Aotrom about, anyway?”

“Sorry about that.” Ridoc cringes and lowers his voice. “He wants to go home—back to Aretia. Says we can launch the search for the seventh breed from there.”

Rhi nods, and Quinn presses her lips in a firm line.

“Yeah, I get that,” I say—it’s a common sentiment among the riot. We’re not exactly welcome here. The unity between Navarrian and Aretian riders crumbled within hours of the battle’s end. “But the only path for an alliance that can save Poromish civilians requires us to be here. At least for now.”

Not to mention, Xaden insists we stay.

“He remains because Navarre’s wards protect you from him.” Tairn blasts another stream of fire when I ignore him, heating his left wing, then crouches before launching skyward with the others.

The courtyard is nearly empty when we enter through the tunnel that runs under the ridgeline separating it from the training grounds. In front of us, snow tops the dormitory wing, the centered rotunda that links the quadrant’s structures, and all but the southernmost roofline of the

academic wing ahead to our left, where Malek's fire burns bright in the highest turret, consuming the belongings of our dead as he requires.

Maybe the god of death will curse me for keeping my mother's personal journals, but it's not like I wouldn't have a few choice words for him should we meet, anyway.

"Report," Aura Beinhaven orders from the dais at our left, where she stands with Ewan Faber—the stocky, sour-faced wingleader of what little remains of Navarre's Fourth Wing.

"Oh, good, you all made it back." Ewan's voice drips with sarcasm as he folds his arms, snow falling on his broad shoulders. "We were so worried."

"Prick was barely a squad leader in Claw when we left," Ridoc mutters.

"Nothing this morning," Rhiannon replies, and Aura nods but doesn't deign to say anything. "Any news from the front?"

My stomach knots. The lack of information is agonizing.

"Nothing I'd be willing to share with a bunch of deserters," Aura answers.

Oh, screw her.

"A bunch of deserters who saved your ass!" Quinn offers a middle finger as we continue past, our boots crunching on the snow-covered gravel. "Navarrian riders, Aretian riders… We can't function like this," she says to the group quietly. "If they won't accept us, the fliers don't have a prayer."

I nod in agreement. Mira's working on that particular issue—not that leadership knows or will allow the use of whatever she's learned, even if it saves the negotiations. Pompous assholes.

"Devera and Kaori will be back any day. They'll sort out command structure as soon as the royals ink a treaty that hopefully pardons us for leaving in the first place." Rhi cocks her head as Imogen walks out of the rotunda in front of us, her pink hair skimming her cheekbone as she descends the stone steps. "Cardulo, you missed patrol."

"I was assigned elsewhere by Lieutenant Tavis," Imogen explains, not missing a beat as she comes our way. Her gaze jumps toward me. "Sorrengail, I need a word."

I nod. She was on Xaden duty.

“See that you’re present tomorrow.” Rhi walks past Imogen with the other two, then pauses halfway up the steps and glances over her shoulder as the others head inside. “Wait. Is Mira due back today?”

“Tomorrow.” Anxiety ties a pretty little bow around my throat and tugs. It’s one thing to form a plan and quite another to carry it out, especially when the consequences could involve the people I love becoming traitors…again.

“Every possible path,” Andarna reminds me.

“Every possible path,” I repeat like a mantra and straighten my shoulders.

“Good.” A slow smile spreads across Rhi’s face. “We’ll be in the infirmary when you’re done,” she promises, then walks up the remaining steps to the rotunda.

“You told the second-years what Mira’s up to?” Imogen whispers with a sharp bite of accusation.

“Only the riders,” I retort just as quietly. “If we get caught, it’s treason, but if the fliers do—”

“It’s war,” Imogen finishes.

“Ridoc, did you freeze this door shut?” Rhi shouts from the top of the steps, yanking on the door handle of the rotunda with her full body weight before marching through its counterpart to her left. “Get back here and fix it, now!”

“Right. Telling them was a solid choice.” Imogen rubs the bridge of her nose as Ridoc laughs hysterically from inside the rotunda. “The four of you are a fucking nuisance. It’s going to be a miracle if we pull this off without getting ourselves executed.”

“You don’t have to be involved.” I stare her down in a way I never would have dreamed of eighteen months ago. “I’ll do it with or without your help.”

“Feeling snarky, are we?” A corner of her mouth tugs upward. “Relax. As long as Mira figures out a plan, of course I’m in.”

“She doesn’t know how to fail.”

“I can see that.” Snow blows across our faces as Imogen’s eyes harden. “But please say you

didn't tell your fearsome foursome everything about why we're doing this."

"Of course not." I shove my gloves into my pocket. "He's still pissed at me for 'burdening you' with the knowledge."

"Then he should stop doing stupid shit that needs to be covered up." She rubs her hands together in the cold and follows me up the steps. "Look, I needed you alone because Garrick, Bodhi, and I talked—"

"Without me?" My spine stiffens.

"About you," she clarifies unapologetically.

"Even better." I reach for the door.

"We've decided you need to rethink your sleeping arrangements."

My grip tightens on the handle and I contemplate slamming the door in her face. "I've decided you can all go fuck yourselves. I'm not running from him. Even in the moments he's lost control, he's never hurt me. He never will."

"That's what I told them you'd say, but don't be surprised if they keep asking. Good to know you're still predictable even if Riorson isn't."

"How was he this morning?" Heat rushes over my face as we walk into the empty rotunda, and I push back my hood. Without classes, formation, or any sense of order, the academic wing might sit abandoned, but commons and the gathering hall are congested with aimless, worried, agitated cadets hoping to survive the next patrol and looking to take their frustrations out on someone else. Every single one of us would kill for a Battle Brief.

"Surly and stubborn as always," Imogen answers when we cross into the dormitory, quieting as we pass a group of glaring second-years from First Wing, including Caroline Ashton, which means the truth-sayers cleared her. Lucky for us, the steps leading down to the Healer Quadrant are blessedly empty. "You consider telling him what we're up to?"

"He's aware we'll be sent to find Andarna's kind. As for the rest? He doesn't want to know." I nod at a pair of approaching Aretian riders out of Third Wing when we reach the tunnels but wait to speak until we're out of earshot. "He's worried about being an unintentional leak—which is ridiculous, but I'm respecting his wishes."

"I can't wait for him to discover you're leading your own rebellion." She grins as we walk across

the enclosed bridge to the Healer Quadrant.

“It’s not a rebellion, and I’m not…leading.” Xaden, Dain, Rhi—they’re leaders. They inspire and command for the good of the unit. I’m just doing whatever it takes to save Xaden.

“Including the mission to find Andarna’s kind?” She throws open the door to the Healer Quadrant, and I follow her in.

“That’s different, and I’m not leading as much as I am selecting a leader. Hopefully.” I glance down the cluttered tunnel, past the quietly sleeping patients dressed mostly in infantry blue, and spot a group of hooded scribes moving among them, no doubt still working to get accurate accounts of the battle. “Sounds the same, but it’s not.”

“Right.” The word drips with sarcasm. “Well, message delivered, so I’m done with this conversation. Let me know when Mira gets back.” She walks off toward main campus. “Give Sawyer my best, and good luck this afternoon!”

“Thanks,” I call after her, then turn toward the infirmary. The scents of herbs and metal hit my lungs as I enter through the double doors. I wave at Trager on my right, who’s among the healing-trained fliers doing their best to help where they can.

He nods back from a patient’s bedside, then reaches for a needle and thread.

I continue quickly to the nearest corner, moving from the healers’ paths as they scurry in and out of the curtain-lined bays where rows of the injured rest.

Ridoc’s laugh sounds from the last bay as I approach. The pale blue curtains are tied back, revealing a pile of discarded winter flight jackets in the corner and every other second-year in our squad crammed around Sawyer’s bed.

“Stop exaggerating,” Rhiannon says from the wooden chair near Sawyer’s head, shaking her finger at Ridoc, who’s sitting on the bed, right where our squadmate’s lower leg used to be. “I simply told them that it was our squad’s table and they needed to—”

“Take their cowardly asses back to the First Wing section where they belonged,” Ridoc finishes for her with another laugh.

“You didn’t really say that.” A corner of Sawyer’s mouth quirks upward, but it’s far from a true smile.

“She did.” I’m careful not to step on Cat’s outstretched legs on the floor beside Maren as I move

into the cramped space, unbuttoning my flight jacket and tossing it onto the pile.

“Riders get offended by the weirdest things.” Cat arches a dark brow and flips through Markham’s history textbook. “We have far bigger issues than tables.”

“True.” Maren nods, plaiting her dark-brown hair into a four-strand braid.

“How was patrol, anyway?” Sawyer scoots to a more upright position without any help.

“Quiet,” Ridoc answers. “I’m starting to think we’ve gotten them all.”

“Or they’ve managed to flee,” Sawyer muses, the light fading from his eyes. “You’ll be chasing them down soon.”

“Not until we graduate.” Rhi crosses her legs. “They’re not sending cadets beyond the borders.”

“Except Violet, of course, who will be off seeking the seventh breed so we can win this war.” Ridoc glances my way with a shit-eating grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep her safe.”

I can’t quite tell if he’s teasing or serious.

Cat snorts and flips another page. “Like they’re going to let you go? Guarantee it’ll be officers only.”

“No way.” Ridoc shakes his head. “It’s her dragon, her rules. Right, Vi?”

Every head turns in my direction. “Assuming they put us on orders, I’ll provide a list of people I trust to go.” A list that’s been through so many drafts, I’m not even sure I’m carrying the right one.

“You should take the squad,” Sawyer suggests. “We work best as a team.” He scoffs. “Who am I kidding. You’ll work best as a team. I’m barely climbing stairs.” He nods to the crutches beside his bed.

“You’re still on the team. Hydrate.” Rhi reaches across the bedside table and over a note that looks to be in Jesinia’s handwriting to grab a pewter mug.

“Water’s not going to grow my leg back.” Sawyer takes it, and the metal handle hisses, forming to his grip. He looks up at me. “I know that’s a shitty thing to say after you lost your mother—”

“Pain isn’t a competition,” I assure him. “There’s always enough to go around.”

He sighs. “I got a visit from Colonel Chandlyr.”

My stomach hollows. “The commander of the retired riders?”

Sawyer nods.

“What?” Ridoc folds his arms. “Second-years don’t retire. Die? Yes. Retire? No.”

“I get that,” Sawyer starts. “I just—”

A shrill scream echoes throughout the infirmary in a knee-wavering pitch that’s reserved for something far worse than pain—terror. The silence that follows chills me to the bone, apprehension lifting the hair on the back of my neck as I unsheathe two of my daggers and turn to face the threat.

“What was that?” Ridoc slides off Sawyer’s bed, and the others move behind me as I step outside the bay and pivot toward the open infirmary doors.

“She’s dead!” A cadet in infantry blue stumbles in and falls to his hands and knees. “They’re all dead!”

There’s no mistaking the gray handprint marking the side of his neck.

Venin.

My heart seizes. We haven’t found them out on patrol—because they’re already inside.

Chapter 2

The rarest of signets—those that rise once in a generation or century—have manifested

concurrently with an equal twice in our records, both critical times in our history, but only once have the six most powerful walked the Continent simultaneously.
As fascinating as that spectacle must have been, I would rather not live to see it happen again.

—A Study on Signets by Major Dalton Sisneros

———————————————————

“They’re within the walls!” Tairn bellows.

“Already figured that out.” I swap my daggers for two alloy-hilted ones at my thighs and move quickly to hand one to Sawyer. “None of us die today.”

He nods, taking the blade by the hilt.

“Maren, protect Sawyer,” Rhiannon orders. “Cat, help whoever you can. Let’s go!”

“Guess I’ll just…stay here?” Sawyer calls after us, muttering a swear word as we take off sprinting between the rows of infirmary beds.

We’re the first to make it to the doors, where Winifred holds the wailing infantry cadet by his upper arms. “Violet, don’t go out there—” she starts.

“Lock the doors!” I shout as we run through.

“Like that’s going to stop them?” Ridoc challenges as we enter the tunnel, then all three of us skid to a halt at the sight before us.

The blankets on every overflow bed down the hallway have been thrown back, revealing desiccated bodies. My stomach plummets. How did this happen so fast?

“Oh shit.” Ridoc draws another dagger at my right as two more riders sprint through the infirmary doors behind us, both from Second Wing.

I reach for Xaden and find his shields not only up but impenetrable.

Frustrating, but fine. I’m perfectly capable of fighting on my own, and I have Ridoc and Rhi with me.

“You do not have a conduit,” Tairn reminds me. Which means I can’t pinpoint my lightning strikes, especially not indoors.

“I’ve always been far more accurate with daggers than my own power. Warn whoever’s riders guard the wardstone.”

“Already done,” he replies.

“Check the bridge!” Rhiannon commands the two from Second Wing, and they take off toward the Riders Quadrant.

“Bring their bodies outside once you’re done killing them so we can roast them for fun,” Andarna suggests.

“Not right now.” I calm my breath and concentrate.

“Eyes open,” Rhiannon says, her voice as steady as her hand as she pulls an alloy-hilted dagger and moves to my left. “Let’s go.”

Then we move as one, quiet and quick as we make our way down the hall. I keep my eyes forward as Rhi and Ridoc check left and right respectively, and their silence tells me all I need to know. There are no survivors.

We follow the curve of the tunnel, passing the last cot, and a scribe flies out of the stairwell ahead, his robes billowing behind him as he runs toward us at full speed.

I flip the dagger in my hand and pinch it by the tip, my heart starting to beat double-time.

“Which way did they go?” Rhi asks the cadet.

The scribe’s hood falls back, revealing red-rimmed eyes with spiderwebbed veins at his temples. Nope, definitely not a cadet. He reaches beneath his robes, but I’ve already flicked my wrist by the time he grabs the pommel of a sword.

My dagger lodges in the left side of his chest, and his eyes bulge in shock as he falls gracelessly to the tunnel floor. His body shrivels in the span of a heartbeat.

“Damn. Sometimes I forget how good you are at that,” Rhi whispers, scanning our surroundings

as we move forward.

“How did you know?” Ridoc asks in the same hushed tone, quickly kicking the husk of a body over and retrieving my blade.

“A scribe would have run toward the Archives.” I take the blade back and wrap my hand around the hilt. “Thanks.” The alloy’s hum of power is a little dimmer but still there, hopefully capable of another killing blow. How many of them had Imogen and I seen on our walk to the infirmary without even realizing? “That’s how they fed without notice. They’re dressed as scribes.”

Two figures in cream robes approach from the opposite side of the tunnel, mage light shining on their first-year rank, and I prepare to throw again.

“Drop the hoods,” Rhi orders.

They both startle, and the cadet on the right lowers her hood quickly, but there’s a slight tremble in her counterpart’s hands as she complies, her wide blue eyes locked on the body at my feet. “Is that…” she whispers, and her friend wraps an arm around her swaying frame.

“Yes.” I lower my blade, noting that neither of them carry red in their eyes or at their temples. “Get back to the Archives and warn the others.”

The women turn and run.

“Up or down?” Ridoc asks, facing the steps.

Someone shouts beneath us.

“Down,” Rhi and I say simultaneously.

“Great.” Ridoc rolls his neck. “Down the stairwell to the torture chamber where an untold number of freshly fed dark wielders wait. Good times.” He takes the lead, switching his dagger to his left hand and lifting his right in preparation to wield as Rhiannon steps in behind me.

We edge down the stairs rapidly, keeping our backs to the stone wall, and I send up a silent thanks to Eran Norris for building Basgiath with stone stairs instead of wooden ones with the potential to creak…or burn.

“Pay attention to the present, not the past,” Tairn lectures.

Metal clangs beneath us, the pitch varying from the ting of colliding blades to the ear-grating rasp of steel scraping against stone. But it's the maniacal laughter mixed with grunts of pain that has me hurrying faster, has power rising, crackling along my skin.

"Control it!" Tairn orders.

"Quiet time," I remind him, throwing my shields up to block him, knowing he can still push through if he wants.

"Stop playing with your kill and help us get this door open!" someone demands from below. If they want a cell door open, they're definitely not on our side. They've come for Jack.

"How many guards are on Barlowe?" Ridoc whispers as we near the turn in the staircase that will expose us to whomever waits beneath.

"Two—" Rhiannon's answer is quickly muffled by the sound of a low and painful scream.

"Make that one," I reply, readying my right hand to throw.

The antechamber of the brig comes into view, and my gaze flies over the all-too-familiar space, taking quick stock of our situation.

Two dark wielders dressed in scribe robes yank at the unmoving door handle to Jack's cell, while a female pulls her ruby-hilted sword across the neck of a second lieutenant who's been pinned to the thick table with daggers through his hands, and a fourth stands at the edge of the shadows.

Her long silver braid swings free of her hood as her attention whips in our direction, and her eerie red gaze jumps to mine and widens slightly under a faded tattoo on her forehead. My blood chills when a smirk tilts her mouth, distorting the red veins at her temples, and then she…disappears.

I blink against the sudden breeze that rustles a loosened strand of my braid, then stare at the empty space she'd occupied. At least I think she had. Am I seeing things now?

Rhi gasps behind me, and my focus jolts to the imprisoned guard. Blood floods the table from the rider's wound, and I swallow back the burn of acid in my throat, catching sight of two corpses to the left, one in cream, the other in black.

The female with the jeweled sword at the table pivots, her short blond hair smacking her sharp cheekbones as she turns in our direction, revealing branches of red veins at her temples.

I flick my wrist just in case this one disappears, too.

“Riders—” Her alarm dies with my blade lodged in the middle of her throat.

Ridoc rushes the two at the door, but they’re ready, one drawing a sword that Ridoc blocks with a thick band of ice.

I throw my remaining dagger at the other as I jump the last two steps, but the dark-haired venin moves unnaturally fast, dodging the strike. My blade bounces off the stone wall behind him as I run toward the rider bleeding out on the table.

Fuck!

Rhi leaps over the female’s body, headed for Ridoc, and I continue on, keeping an eye on the one I missed.

The venin swings his arm, and a shape flies toward me.

“Drop, Vi!” Ridoc shouts, throwing his hand out, palm down, and a chill sweeps over the front of my legs as spikes rush at my face.

I hit my knees and slide along a small sheet of ice as the mace whips over my head, slicing through the air with a whistle.

“Not the silver hair!” the dark wielder with the sword bellows, and I scramble to my feet, slipping on the blood-covered stone. “We need her!”

To control Xaden? Fuck that. I’ll never be used against him again.

“Mine, now!” Rhi shouts, and when I glance left, she’s swinging the mace at its previous owner, giving me time to get to the twitching rider on the table.

“Hold on,” I tell him, reaching for his throat to staunch the bleeding, but I pause as his last breath rattles his chest and he falls limp. He’s gone. My heart clenches for all of a beat before I draw two more daggers and turn toward my friends.

The black-haired venin moves in a blur, ducking beneath the mace Rhiannon swings, then appears before me like he’d been standing there all along.

Fast. They're too damned fast.

My heart jolts as I jerk my dagger to his throat, and he studies me with sickening excitement in his red eyes. Power floods my veins, heating my skin and lifting the hair along my arms.

"Ah, the lightning wielder. You're a long way from the sky, and we both know you can't kill me with that knife," he taunts, and the veins along his temples pulse as Rhi sneaks up behind him, her alloy-hilted dagger poised to strike.

Shadows quake at the edges of the chamber, and a corner of my mouth rises. "I won't have to."

His eyes flare in confusion for all of a millisecond before shadows explode around us, immediately devouring every speck of light in a sea of endless black I instantly recognize as home. A band of darkness wraps around my hips and yanks me backward, then brushes my cheek gently, steadying my galloping heartbeat and quieting my power.

Screams fill the chamber, followed by a pair of thuds, and I know without a doubt any threat to my life's been extinguished.

A heartbeat later, the shadows retreat, revealing the shriveled bodies of the dark wielders on the floor, alloy-hilted daggers embedded in their chests.

I lower my weapons as Xaden strides toward me from the center of the room, the hilts of the two swords he keeps strapped to his back peeking above his shoulders. He's in thick winter flight leathers, devoid of any markings but his second lieutenant rank, and speckled with tiny dots of water that tell me he's been out in the snow.

Second lieutenant. The same rank as Barlowe's guards had been.

The same as Garrick, who's standing at the base of the steps behind Xaden, and almost every other officer temporarily stationed here to protect Basgiath.

My heart stutters and my gaze rakes over Xaden's tall, muscled frame, searching for any sign of injury. Gold-flecked onyx eyes meet mine, and my breath stabilizes only when I realize he's unharmed and there isn't a single trace of red to be found anywhere near his irises. He may technically be an initiate, but he's nothing like the venin we just fought.

Gods, I love this man.

"Tell me something, Violence." A muscle in his square jaw ticks as he stares down at me, rippling

the tawny-brown skin of his stubbled cheek. “Why is it always you?”

• • •

An hour later, we’re dismissed from the debrief with the commandant of the Riders Quadrant, Colonel Panchek, and sent on our way.

“He doesn’t even seemed fazed that they were working to rescue Barlowe instead of going for the wardstone.” Garrick shoves his hand through his short dark hair as he descends the staircase of the academic wing ahead of Xaden and me.

“Maybe it’s not the first attempt.” Rhi glances back over her shoulder at Garrick. “It’s not like we’re getting briefed every day.”

We aren’t safe here, not that we ever really were.

“Panchek’ll notify the other leadership, right?” Ridoc asks as we pass the third floor.

“Melgren already knows. There were only two of us down there.” Xaden glances pointedly at Garrick’s hand, where his rebellion relic peeks out from the sleeve of his uniform.

“I’m just grateful for the wards Sorrengail put in place before she left.” Garrick doesn’t bother to clarify that he’s talking about my sister. “Barlowe can’t hear or see a thing outside that chamber unless someone opens the door, so it’s not like he’s gathering new intel. From the look of the stones he’s drained within the cell, he’ll be dead within the week.”

Xaden tenses at my side and I reach for him mentally, but his shields are thicker than the walls of this fortress.

“It’s not always me,” I whisper to Xaden, brushing my hand against his as we continue down the wide spiral staircase, approaching the second floor.

Xaden scoffs, then laces his fingers with mine and brings the back of my hand to his perfectly sculpted mouth. “It is,” he replies just as quietly, punctuating the remark with a kiss.

My pulse jumps just like it does every time he puts his lips on my skin, which hasn’t happened much in the last couple of weeks.

“You know, that whole slay-them-in-darkness thing was badass”—Ridoc lifts his finger—“but I totally had him.”

“You didn’t.” Xaden strokes his thumb over mine, and Garrick’s shoulders shake with a quiet laugh as we descend the final flight of steps to the main entrance.

“I was about to have him,” Ridoc argues, shaking that finger.

“You weren’t,” Xaden assures him.

“How could you possibly know that?” Ridoc drops his hand.

Garrick and Xaden exchange a look of sheer exasperation, and I fight a smile.

“Because you were on one side of the room,” Garrick says, “but your blade was on the other.”

“A problem I was in the middle of solving.” Ridoc shrugs, reaching the ground floor with Rhi.

Xaden pauses, tugging my hand in wordless request that I stay with him, which I do.

“We should check on the others.” Rhi glances up at me. “You headed to the great hall?”

I nod, and nerves jumble in my stomach.

“You’re ready. You’ve got this,” she says with a flash of a smile. “Want us to walk you over?”

“No. Go check on the squad,” I reply, and Garrick stills a step beneath us. “I’ll find you afterward.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Ridoc promises over his shoulder as he heads to the left with Rhi, disappearing around the corner.

“Everything all right?” Garrick turns our way and studies Xaden’s eyes.

“It will be if you give us five minutes alone,” Xaden answers.

Concern knits Garrick’s brow as he glances at me, but he quickly smooths his expression when I nod.

“For fuck’s sake. You trust her to babysit me at night, don’t you?” Xaden narrows his eyes on his best friend.

“Don’t act like I’m the reason you need to be supervised,” Garrick fires back.

Shadows creep across the step at our feet.

“It’s fine,” I quickly assure Garrick, keeping my hand entwined with Xaden’s much larger one. “I’m fine. He’s fine. All fine.”

Garrick glances between us, then pivots and moves down the steps. “I’ll be close by,” he warns, turning the corner to the right, toward the sparring gym.

“Damn it.” Xaden pulls his hand from mine, then leans back against the wall, his swords clinking against the masonry. His jacket falls open as he rests his head on the stone window frame. “I never realized how much I like alone time until I didn’t have any.” His throat works and his hands clench at his sides.

“I’m sorry.” I cross the foot of space between us, stepping between his feet and lifting my hand to the side of his neck, right over the magically inked lines of his mark.

“Don’t be. He has every right to worry about leaving me alone with you.” He covers my hand with his own and lowers his head, slowly opening those eyes I can never get enough of.

“I trust you.” Not a trace of red to be seen.

“You shouldn’t.” He wraps his arm around my waist and tugs me against his body. The contact instantly heats my skin and makes my stomach flip in the best possible way. “I’m pretty fucking sure the only reason he and Bodhi aren’t sleeping at the foot of our bed is that they know I would have killed them for it before, let alone now.”

Not that we’re doing anything in that bed besides sleeping. I might trust him, but he sure as Dunne doesn’t trust himself, at least not enough to let go of control in any form.

“In the spirit of transparency, I should tell you they’d like me to reconsider our sleeping arrangements.” I splay my other hand over his warm chest.

His eyes flare, and his arm tightens around me. “Maybe you should.”

“That’s not happening. I told Imogen to get fucked.”

A smile ghosts his mouth. “I’m sure you did.”

“They’ll stop hovering as soon as you’re cured.” My gaze skims the carved line of his jaw, then along the rise of his cheekbones to the locks of his black hair that have fallen over his forehead. He’s still him. Still mine.

His muscles tense beneath my fingers. “You ready to meet with the Senarium?”

“Yes.” I nod. “And don’t change the subject. I will find a way to cure you.” I put every ounce of my determination into the words and lift my eyebrows at him. “Let me in.” It isn’t a request. To my surprise, he lowers his shields, and the shimmering onyx bond between us solidifies. “You wielded your signet today. Behind the wards.”

He nods, dropping his hand from mine and fully wrapping his arms around me. “I channeled from Sgaeyl.”

I savor the feel of his body against mine but don’t push my luck for a kiss. “Did she tell you we were in trouble?”

His gaze falls away and he shakes his head. “She’s still not speaking to me. Flying is awkward as fuck.”

My chest threatens to crack under the weight of the sadness in his tone. “I’m so sorry.” I slide my hands around the small of his back and hug him, turning my head so his heart beats beneath my ear. “She’ll come around.”

“Don’t count on it,” Tairn warns with a growl down the mental pathway that only belongs to us, and I blatantly ignore him.

Xaden lowers his chin to the top of my head. “She knows I’m not…whole. She senses it.”

I startle and pull back, lifting my hands to hold his face. “You’re whole,” I whisper. “I don’t know what you paid to access that power, but it didn’t change you—”

“It did,” he counters, sidestepping down a stair and out of my arms.

I can only think of one way to prove it didn’t. “Do you still love me?” I hurl the inquiry at him like a weapon.

His gaze snaps to mine. “What kind of question is that?”

“Do. You. Still. Love. Me?” I enunciate every word and lean right into his space just to prove that I’m not intimidated by him.

He cups the back of my neck and pulls me within inches of his face—close enough to kiss. “I could reach the rank of Maven, lead armies of dark wielders against everyone we care for, and watch every vein in my body turn red as I channel all the power in the Continent, and I would still love you. What I did doesn’t change that. I’m not sure anything can.”

“See? You’re still you.” My gaze drops to his mouth. “Telling me you’re capable of horrible things while still loving me is pretty much your idea of foreplay.”

His eyes darken, and he hauls me closer until only his own obstinance separates our lips. “That should scare the shit out of you, Violet.”

“It doesn’t.” I rise on my toes and brush my lips over his. “Nothing about you scares me. I won’t run, Xaden.”

“Damn it.” He drops his hand and retreats a step, putting space between us again. “With my shields up, I didn’t know you were in the interrogation chamber until I was halfway down the stairs.”

“What?” I blink. “Then how did you know to come help?”

Silence stretches between us, and a prickle of apprehension makes me shift my weight, aggravating my lower back.

“I sensed them,” he finally answers. “The same way they sense me.”

My stomach pitches, and I reach for the wall, splaying my palm over the rough-hewn stone to keep my balance. “That’s not possible.”

“It is.” He nods slowly, watching me. “That’s how I know I’ve changed, how Garrick and I have managed to slay more than a dozen of them this week. I can feel them calling to me, just like I can feel the source pulsing beneath my feet with its incomparable power…because I’m one of them.” His eyes narrow. “Scared yet?”

Chapter 3

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Sometimes I worry about Violet. She has your sharp wit, quick mind, and steadfast heart paired with my bullheaded tenacity. When she finally and truly gives that heart, I fear it will overrule the other gifts you've given her and logic will cede its voice to love. And if her first two liaisons are any indication of what we might expect… Gods help her, my love, I'm afraid our daughter has atrocious taste in men.

—Recovered, Unsent Correspondence of General Lilith Sorrengail

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Xaden can sense them.

My fingernails bend slightly when my hand flexes along the grout line, holding on for dear life as my mind spins. But just because he can sense them doesn't mean he gave up part of his soul, right? It's there in his eyes, watching me, waiting for me to reject him, or worse, push him away like I did after Resson.

Maybe it's more dire than I thought, but he's still whole, still him. Just with…heightened senses.

I shove my stomach right back where it belongs and hold his stare. "Scared of you?" I shake my head. "Never."

"You will be," he whispers, looking over my features like he needs to memorize them.

"Your five minutes are up," Garrick says from the base of the steps. "And Violet has a meeting to get to."

Xaden's expression shifts into something dangerous as he glares at his best friend and leans away from me.

"She told you we think you should sleep somewhere else, didn't she?" Garrick rolls his neck like he's preparing for a fight.

"She did." Xaden starts down the steps, and I follow. "And I'll tell you the same thing she said to Imogen. Get fucked."

“Figured.” Garrick turns a pleading look on me, and I smile back as we walk out of the academic wing and into the surprisingly empty rotunda, crossing between two dragon pillars. “Thought you’d at least be logical, Violet.”

“Me? You’re the ones acting based on feelings and with no evidence whatsoever. My decision to trust him is based purely on the facts of our proven history.”

“As much as I appreciate the concern,” Xaden drawls, his voice edging on icy, “you try to dictate the occupants of Violet’s bed again, and we’re going to have problems.”

Garrick shakes his head at his best friend but drops the subject as we make our way to main campus, passing through the chaotic cleanup near the infirmary.

The death roll in the Infantry Quadrant will be painfully long tomorrow.

“For someone who’s about to face the highest-ranking aristocracy in the kingdom, you seem pretty calm, Sorrengail,” Garrick remarks as we cross onto the thick red carpet of the administration building.

The hallway is cramped with people in tunics of various colors waiting for talks to resume, identified only by the heraldry embroidered on cross-body sashes that remind me of our dress uniforms. Our own provinces are easy to recognize, and I even spot Braevick’s as heads begin to turn in our direction.

“I’ve known this was coming and have a plan. Two weeks is a lot of time to overthink every possible scenario,” I reply as the crowd slowly parts to the side of the hall in what I’ve come to think of as the Xaden effect. I can’t blame them for staring. He’s gorgeous. I can’t blame them for backing up, either. He’s not only terrifyingly powerful, he’s known to be responsible for splitting Navarre’s riot and providing weapons to Poromiel.

Safe to say not every gaze trained on him—on any of the three of us—is friendly.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” Xaden asks as we approach the massive double doors of the great hall.

“It’s what she wants,” I tell him, and one of the guards adorned with the crest of Calldyr slips into the hall, no doubt to announce our arrival. “And it’s what we need. You still up for coming with?” I glance at him. “Even beyond the wards?”

The magical barrier is doing more than protecting us from him—it’s protecting him from himself.

His jaw flexes. “Even beyond the wards,” he confirms as we reach the doors and the remaining stone-faced guard in infantry blue.

“I assume you’re expecting me?” I ask the guard.

“You will wait to be escorted, Cadet Sorrengail,” she replies without looking my way.

Pleasant.

“I’m starting to think twice about this meeting,” Garrick says from Xaden’s other side, his gaze scanning the heavily armed crowd in the hallway. “She’s been invited to appear before the Senarium alone, and we haven’t exactly been pardoned for leaving Basgiath and taking a large portion of the riot. Brennan might be sitting in on the treaty negotiations on behalf of Aretia, but we don’t have a seat on the council. Anything could happen to Violet in there.”

“Already thought about that,” I assure him. “They need me alive for Andarna’s sake if not Tairn’s. I’ll be fine.”

“She has Lewellen in there representing Tyrrendor and can set the whole damned place on fire with a wave of her hand,” Xaden adds, folding his arms and glowering at the guard. “I’m more concerned for their safety than hers.”

The door on the right opens, and the other guard walks through.

My stomach twists when General Melgren appears in the doorway, his beady eyes narrowing as he looks down his beak of a nose at me. “Cadet Sorrengail, the Senarium is ready to receive you.” His gaze darts to Garrick, then Xaden. “Alone.”

“I’ll be right out here”—Xaden’s tone slips into menace—“deterred by these wooden doors that hang an inch off the ground.”

“Subtle.” I fight the tug at the corner of my mouth.

Melgren gestures me inside but doesn’t take his eyes off Xaden.

“Never going to be,” he replies as I walk into the hall. “I have every faith in your ability to protect yourself, but say the word and I’ll rip the doors off their hinges.”

“You’re such a romantic.” I quickly take in the new furniture arrangement of the familiar room, finding a long trestle table running the length of the hall with dozens of chairs, no doubt to accommodate the negotiations. Six nobles dressed in lushly embroidered tunics and gowns sit facing me at the closest end, representing each of Navarre’s six provinces. I know them all thanks to my mother, but only the one on the far left offers me a tired smile as I approach the center of their grouping and place my hands on the back of the chair.

Lewellen.

“Any last-minute additions?” I ask Andarna as Melgren walks around the table and sits to the right of the Duchess of Morraine.

“Nothing that comes to mind,” she responds.

Here we go.

“Let’s make this quick,” the Duchess of Morraine snaps in a high-pitched voice from the right, a giant ruby jostling along her collarbone when she heaves a sigh. “We have three days to save these negotiations and need every hour of it.”

“I couldn’t agree more—” I start.

“We’ve been briefed by General Melgren and conferred with the king,” the Duke of Calldyr interrupts directly across from me, stroking his short blond beard. “As of this moment, you will be assigned to a—” He glances at Melgren. “What did you call it?”

“A task force,” Melgren supplies, sitting eerily still as he studies me.

“Task force,” the duke repeats. “Which will embark on a quest to find and recruit the seventh dragon breed with an aim to increase our numbers and hopefully provide insight into killing the venin.”

I reach into the pocket of my uniform and pull out two folded pieces of parchment. I hold up the first. “Should we agree to participate, this is a list of Andarna’s demands.”

The Duchess of Elsum raises her dark brows, and the Duke of Luceras recoils.

“You are not in a place to make demands,” the Duchess of Morraine admonishes. “While we owe your mother a debt of gratitude, you are still considered a deserter.”

“A deserter who saved this college, our wards, and our kingdom, not to mention took on multiple venin within these walls a few hours ago, all of which I’ve done without falling under Navarrian chain of command.” I tilt my head. “Makes it hard to assign me to anything, as none of you commands the Aretian riot. And they’re not my demands, they’re hers.”

“The return of our riot is a matter still in negotiation.” Melgren glances down the table at Lewellen. “This assignment is being made in good faith, with the understanding that the riot will remain at Basgiath. Lewellen, seeing as you’ve secretly represented Aretia for years—which is a separate issue this council has yet to address—perhaps you’d be willing to read her demands.”

The rebuke has most of the aristocrats shifting in their seats.

Lewellen holds out his hand, and I give him the folded list. Step one, complete. A smile tugs at the corners of his lined mouth as he reads. “Some of these are quite…unique.”

“As is she,” I reply, launching into step two. “I will take six riders—”

“You will take no one,” Melgren interrupts. “You are a second-year cadet who will only be allowed to participate because we need your dragon. It has already been decided that Captain Grady will lead the task force, due largely to his experience behind enemy lines.”

My stomach sinks. “My RSC professor?” No, no, no, this is not how this was supposed to go. I grasp the list that has Mira’s name inked at the top.

“The same.” Melgren nods. “He’s been made aware, and you can expect to hear from him once we’ve settled the Poromish alliance and its requirements and he’s configured the squad of his choosing.”

His choosing. Power rises within me, simmering in my blood. “Which will at least include Lieutenant Riorson, correct?”

The aristocrats all look to Melgren.

“Riorson’s involvement will be at Grady’s discretion.” Melgren stares back at me, unflinching.

“Tairn and Sgaeyl can’t be separated,” I argue.

“Which would suggest Riorson will be among his selections,” Melgren states with about as much emotion as a tree. No wonder Mom liked him so much. “But again, it’s at the captain’s discretion.”

Captain's discretion. My blood hums. "Determining the members of the squad is one of Andarna's demands." In every scenario I'd thought through, Andarna's compliance had always been the card I'd mentally played.

"Then it's one that won't be met." Melgren folds his hands in his lap. "It's a nonnegotiable military operation, not a class field trip."

"We won't go," Tairn states.

"We have to go!" Andarna argues, her voice rising.

The parchment crumples in my hand. "She's right. We have to go." Andarna deserves this, first and foremost. But if there's any chance they know how to defeat the venin or how to cure Xaden, then we truly have no choice. "Every possible path." Which means we have to give.

"Shall we consider the matter settled?" the Duke of Calldyr asks.

Absolutely the fuck not.

"It is," Melgren states.

"Only if you meet the rest of Andarna's demands." I lift my chin. "I think both she and Tairn have shown they're more than willing to walk—if not fly—away from Basgiath."

Melgren's nostrils flare, and I bite back a crow of victory. "We will consider approving her other requests."

"Then it's settled," the Duke of Calldyr announces. "Excellent. This development should help smooth negotiations."

"At least letting the fliers enter the quadrant would help," I add, frustration burning in my chest.

"When they can't even wield to protect themselves?" Melgren scoffs. "The riders will eat them alive."

"Isn't that one of Poromiel's arguments against leaving those additional forces with us?" the Duchess of Morraine asks, and Melgren nods.

They aren't forces. They're cadets in need of the protection of the wards.

The duke scratches his neck. “We’ll think on it. The fliers handling themselves in the quadrant would go a long way toward smoothing that negotiation point.”

My thoughts exactly.

“You’re dismissed, cadet,” Melgren orders.

“I’ll walk you out,” Lewellen says, pushing away from the table and rising to his feet.

I slip the mangled list into my pocket and cross the cobblestones to the door, trying to pick up the pieces of my shattered expectations. There’s no telling if we’ll be able to trust whoever Grady selects for the squad.

“I’ll work on these,” Lewellen says quietly, raising the list of Andarna’s demands. “And in the meantime”—he reaches into his tunic and retrieves a palm-size missive—“I was asked to give you this privately.”

“Thank you,” I respond out of habit, taking the parchment.

He knocks twice on the door, and I depart through the one the guard gestures me through on the left.

Opening the missive, I walk into the hall, recognizing Tecarus’s sprawling handwriting.

You have three days to hold up your end of our bargain.

Fuck. That’s not an option. I look up and find every member of my squad waiting, a wall of black and brown holding back a sea of colorful tunics and gowns.

“How did it go?” Imogen asks.

“Give her a second,” Rhi lectures.

My gaze sweeps over them as the door shuts behind me, and then I lock eyes with Xaden, who is crossing the distance between us. “The plan went to shit.”

Which means the one I’m holding in my hand can’t fail.

• • •

Morning light pours in through my window, and I slowly blink awake to the sound of the campus bells chiming eight times. Snow sits stacked on the sill, but the skies beyond are blue for the first time since solstice.

Holy shit, I didn't just sleep, I slept in. Maybe it was hitting the gym last night with Imogen, or the emotional letdown after I'd vented with Rhi and Tara about why Grady was the worst possible choice to lead Andarna's mission, but I didn't wake once, thank gods. I must have drifted off after settling into bed with the book on Navarrian imports predating the Trade Agreement of Resson that Jesinia had tossed at me when I'd shown up to visit Sawyer, still seething. Lifting my head from the pillow, I spot the closed book on my nightstand, my page marked by one of Xaden's daggers.

A slow smile curves my mouth at his thoughtfulness. Guess I'd been asleep by the time he made it to bed after his daily meeting with Brennan, Lewellen, and, as of yesterday afternoon, Duke Lindell, who fostered Xaden and Liam.

I turn under the warmth of the blankets, fully expecting to find Xaden wide awake given the hour, but he's fast asleep with one arm curled around his pillow and the other with its freshly pink scar lying on the blanket between us. My heart clenches, and staring seems the only logical action, if only for just a few moments. Gods, is he beautiful. His face is softened in sleep, and all the tension he usually carries in his jaw, his shoulders, is strikingly absent. The last week has been hard on him, being constantly torn between his duties as a rider and navigating the responsibility he carries for Aretia in a space that doesn't recognize it. I fight the urge to touch him. He's slept like shit since the battle, too, and if he can get even just another few minutes, he should have it.

As slowly and silently as possible, I scoot toward my side of the bed and sit up, letting my feet dangle just above the floor. My hair is still partly damp from braiding it right after my bath last night, and I make quick, quiet work of running my brush through it so it has a prayer of drying before it's time to head out into the cold. Once I set the brush back on the nightstand, I stretch with a speed a sloth would be proud of—

A band of shadow wraps around my waist a second before my hair is swept to the side and Xaden sets his lips to the juncture of my neck and shoulder in an open-mouthed kiss.

Oh, yes.

I gasp as an immediate flare of heat races down my spine at the lash of his tongue, the scrape of his teeth, and my head falls back against his shoulder. He moves straight to the hypersensitive spot at the side of my neck like my body is a map only he has the key to, and I spear my fingers into his hair as my back arches. Damn, he knows exactly how to take me from the ground to sky-fucking-high in less than a handful of heartbeats.

“Mine,” he growls against my skin, and his hand skims the hemline of my nightdress before dragging it up my thigh.

“Mine,” I counter, tightening my grip in his hair.

He laughs into my neck, the sound low and intoxicating as his hand crosses over the juncture of my thighs, then grabs hold of my hip and tugs.

My fingers slip from his hair, and the room spins before my back hits the center of the bed. Then he’s all I see, rising above me with a wicked smile in nothing but loose sleeping pants, sliding his hard thigh between mine. “Yours,” he says like a promise, and my breath catches at the intensity in his eyes.

Gods, it feels like my chest is going to crack open when he looks at me like that.

“I love you so much it hurts.” I slide my hands down the warm, bare skin of his chest, my fingertips ghosting the scar over his heart and down to the rigid lines of his stomach.

He draws a sharp breath through his teeth. “Good, because that’s exactly how I love you, too.” His thigh moves between mine with exquisite friction, and then he’s all over me, erasing every one of my thoughts except how I can get him closer.

His hands stroke every curve, and his mouth caresses every inch of skin down to my neckline. Need races through my veins like flame, igniting every nerve ending, then flaring bright as his teeth graze the tip of my breast through the fabric of my nightdress.

I whimper and lace my fingers behind his neck. Holy shit do I need this man.

“That’s one of my favorite sounds.” His words wrap around my mind as his hand glides up my thigh, slipping under my nightdress to toy with the line of my underwear, and I fucking melt. “Second only to those little gasps you make in the moments before you come.”

His knuckles brush over my clit through the infuriating layer of fabric between us, and my hips rock as his mouth moves to my other breast. There are too many damned clothes between us.

He lifts his head to watch me as his fingers dip beneath the barrier of my underwear. Then he’s right there, stroking and teasing, slipping over my clit, and finally, thank-fucking-gods, giving me the exact pressure I need.

“Xaden,” I moan, and my head thrashes on the pillow as power whips through me, racing down

every bone, every vein, every inch of my skin.

“Changed my mind.” He slides two fingers inside me. “That’s my favorite sound.” His fingers stroke deep, then curl upward as he withdraws just enough.

My breath hitches, and a corner of his mouth rises into a smirk that has my walls clenching around his talented fingers. Power hums, spiraling into a tight coil within me, and my hands slip to clutch his shoulders, pressing into his rebellion relic.

“How do you want me to take you, Violet?” His brow furrows as he adds his thumb against my clit, and the energy gathering within me vibrates. “Here on your back with me above you? Before me on your hands and knees with your ass in the air? Against the wall so I can drive harder? Astride so you can control the pace? Tell me.”

Control? That’s only an illusion when it comes to being with him. The second he touches me, I’m his to do with however he wants.

“All of it.” I’m on fire in the sweetest way possible, and his words fan the flames. I don’t care how he gets inside me, I only care that it’s right. Fucking. Now.

His eyes flare. “I can feel it. I can feel you.” He stares for a second longer, then lowers his head to mine, hovering an inch or two above my lips, and quickens the pace of his fingers, winding me so tight I know the only way I’ll survive it is to shatter. “Bright and hot and fucking perfect.”

And I want all of him, his cock, not just his fingers. I can feel just how hard he is against my thigh, and I need him moving within me, with me, unraveling, wild and unhinged. I just can’t find those words, not when he’s set on making me speechless.

I grasp for the shimmering onyx that connects our minds and pour my pure, acute need into it as my breath comes faster and faster.

“Violet,” he groans, and lines etch between his brow as his jaw flexes, as if he’s holding himself back.

Why would he be fighting this? Fighting us? I’m his, but he’s mine, too. Doesn’t he remember how good we are together? Holding the bond with a viselike grip, I recall the armoire cracking against my back, the sublime feel of him pounding into me, hard and so damned deep, both of us lost in the other, breathing the same heated air, living for nothing but the peak of the next thrust.

The power coiled within me starts to burn, flushing my skin and threatening to incinerate everything I am if I don’t let it go. Gods, how it would feel to have that soft brush of his shadows all over my skin, enveloping me with a thousand caresses as he—

His forehead falls against mine, and he trembles, sweat beading on his forehead. “Fuck, love.”

There’s something about hearing that guttural groan, all rasp and desperation, that hurtles me over the edge with the next stroke of his fingers. I try to hold it close, but power snaps, and light flashes to my left as I shatter. Shadow floods the space for a stuttered heartbeat as pleasure crests in waves, pulling me under and dragging me to the surface again and again.

I catch the scent of burned wood, and Xaden whips both his hands to the headboard above me. The torture twisting his face sobers me up in less than a second. He looks like he’s in unbearable pain.

“Xaden?” I whisper, reaching for him.

“Don’t.” It comes out half demand and all plea.

My hands fall to my chest, and when I trip down our bond, it’s faded and sealed by a wall of chilled onyx. “What’s happening?”

“I need space.” He bites out the words.

“All right.” I get out from under him and scurry off the bed, immediately spotting the scorched crack in the nightstand. At least I’m getting better at not setting the trees on fire. “Is this far enough?”

“Not sure the isle kingdoms would be far enough,” he mutters, slowing his breathing.

What the fuck? “I’m sorry?” I watch in utter confusion as he gathers his control, then nods like he’s certain of himself again.

“I forgot.” He slowly lets go of the headboard and sits back on his heels, gripping his thighs, then letting his hands fall at his sides. “I woke up and saw you sitting there, and it was the most natural thing in the world to reach for you, but I’m not natural anymore. Fuck, I’m so sorry, Violet.”

Oh. “I forgot, too.” The second he put his mouth on me. “You have nothing to apologize for, and don’t say you’re not natural—” Wait. My mouth curves. This is a totally solvable problem. “In fact, I think you just did us a favor.” I take a single step toward the bed, and his head snaps in my direction. “Nothing bad happened, Xaden. You just had your hands all over me, inside me, and I’m perfectly fine. Give me two seconds to crawl across this bed, and you’ll be gloriously fine, too.”

His eyes slide shut, and he gestures to the headboard. “Not fine.”

My gaze narrows on the dark wood, and I have to lean in a little to finally see two faint marks of discoloration, barely a shade lighter than the original stain, right where his thumbs had been. I cover my stomach with my hand like that can keep it from sinking.

Did he just channel?

Chapter 4

There are two reasons rider cadets are not given the same summer and winter leave as others: Firstly, civilians do not react well to dragons casually roaming their villages. Secondly, raising tigers for war requires locking their cages lest they turn on each other…or you.

—Sharpen the Talon: A Professor's Guide by Colonel Tispany Calthea

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I shake my head at the two subtle marks.

"That's nothing. It's barely there." And his eyes look exactly the same from this distance. Whatever he did wasn't even close to what had happened during the battle.

"Because I stopped." He climbs off the far side of the bed and retreats until the backs of his thighs hit my desk. "The second your power rose, I felt it and remembered why I'd promised myself I wasn't going to touch you. And I thought, if I could at least take care of you, that would be enough for me, but then I was so fucking close…" He white-knuckles the edge of my desk and brings his gaze to mine. "I can't afford to lose control around you. Not even the edge of it." He glances toward the headboard. "Not like that. Not at all."

My chest aches, and I breathe deeply to slow my racing heart. If he truly channeled… "Can I come over there? I won't touch you."

He nods. "I'm all right now. Firmly under control."

I cross the cold floor in my bare feet and put myself directly in front of him, sighing with relief

when I don't find a trace of red in his eyes. "No red."

His shoulders dip. "Good. I locked it down pretty quick and didn't even feel myself taking anything, but I obviously did."

"Sandpaper takes more than you did." I look back at the headboard just to be sure I wasn't imagining things. "I can barely see it, and only because I'm looking."

"I took it without thinking. Without choice. And if it had been you?" He tucks my hair behind my ear. "I would never have forgiven myself." He heaves a heavy sigh.

The ache in my chest only sharpens. "Are you going to go all broody and try to pull away from me? Because fair warning, I'm not going to let that happen."

"No." The corners of his mouth rise. "I just think we've been right to steer clear of activities where I can't be trusted to keep control. It's the only way you're safe, and as much as I want you to run, I'm too selfish to give you up."

I nod slowly, since it's not like I'm going to argue with what's obviously his line.

"And just so you know, that memory of yours was really fucking hot. I loved every second of it." He swallows and grips both sides of the desk again, like he already regrets his decision.

My brow knits. "I'm not quite sure how I even did it. Is the thought sharing an inntinnsic thing? Or a bond thing? It's happened more than once with us."

A corner of his mouth rises, and his grip relaxes. "No fucking clue. I've never tried it with anyone else." His smirk shifts to a full smile, and I breathe a little easier. "The first time, I was sitting in tactics and couldn't get you out of my damned head. Then you reached out, struggling to wield when you'd all but set the whole campus on fire the night before, and I just let the memory play, partly to help you, but mostly so you'd be in the same hell I was in." There's zero guilt in the admission. "Now let's get dressed. We probably slept through breakfast."

We get ready in relative normalcy considering what just happened. I wrap my knee quickly, going above and below my kneecap to hold it in place, then finish dressing. By the time I slip my armor on over my undershirt, Xaden is there, lacing it on just as efficiently as when he takes it off, though one takes considerably longer than the other. "You were out late last night," I say as he works his way to the tie. "Anything to do with Duke Lindell being here?"

"Yeah." He tugs gently, and my shoulders straighten.

“Makes me glad you’re sleeping here,” I note, and his fingers still. “All three of the highest Houses of Tyrrendor are here, two of whom are known to hold allegiance only to the province, and the third is suspected.” I glance over my shoulder at him. “Was it not Lindell who made sure you and Liam were trained to enter the quadrant?”

Xaden nods. “It was, though Lewellen had a hand in it, too.”

My brows rise. “I’m sure it’s crossed Melgren’s mind that he could wipe the slate clean. There’s a lot of chaos in these halls and almost no one of rank to notice.” Be careful. I say those two words with my eyes.

He nods again, then goes back to situating the corset, and I face forward. “Killing me isn’t required to annihilate the Tyrrish aristocracy. Officially, I’m just a lieutenant who has no place in any of the negotiations, and yet I’m supposed to speak for Aretia, according to your brother. All done.” He ties the corset strings, then shocks the shit out of me by placing a kiss beneath my ear before he walks to the weapons rack by the door.

“Thanks. Do you want to?” I ask, tugging my uniform top on and buttoning it.

“Sit in on the negotiations?” he asks, shrugging on his back sheaths.

“Speak for Aretia. All of it.” I cross the room, starting to braid my hair into its usual coronet on my way to the desk, and he looks at me with an expression I can’t read. “You said you were happy with the way things were running, but I don’t know if anyone ever…asked you.”

His brow furrows. “The Assembly runs Aretia. I just own the house, which is probably a good thing, since I’m…well, venin. Great on the battlefield, but not a good governing quality.”

I lock every muscle to keep from flinching, then continue braiding.

“Anyway, we’re trying to work out the terms of the riot staying, and Lewellen seems to think he can at least get my father’s sword back from Tauri, but it all feels tangled. If we don’t stay, Poromiel walks. If Navarre can’t protect the fliers here at Basgiath, Poromiel walks. If anyone murders anyone—which happens a lot around here—”

“Poromiel walks,” I guess, reaching for the pins on my desk to secure the braid in place, and most definitely noticing that he used the term we. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I’ll be actively working on one of those things in the next forty-eight hours, but he doesn’t want to know, and losing control a few minutes ago isn’t going to help that stance.

“Exactly, and two of the third-year fliers had a run-in with First Wing last night near the great hall that left everyone bloody.” He starts sheathing his daggers along his thighs. “If Tauri isn’t willing

to take civilians, then Poromiel has nothing to gain by promising not to attack our outposts. The only incentives are weapons and keeping the fliers safe."

"Both of which can be achieved by an alliance with only Aretia," I note as Xaden begins putting my daggers in place, slipping them into the sheaths at my thighs and the ones sewn into my uniform along my ribs.

"Now who sounds like the separatist?" His mouth quirks. "If we had stable wards, maybe. But we know they're faltering, and even if they weren't, the last time Tyrrendor attempted to secede, it didn't go—" He cocks his head to the side like he's listening, then storms toward the door, whipping it open. "Are you fucking kidding me? Neither of us has even used a bathing chamber yet."

Ah, there's the hard-ass everyone else gets. I don't fight the urge to smile. There's a huge part of me that likes that I'm the only one who gets his softer edges. "Who is it?" I ask, grabbing my flight jacket off the back of the chair.

"You're in there with my little sister and you're asking me if I'm kidding you?" Brennan snaps back. "Usually, I consider myself pretty understanding about the fact that you sleep in her bed, and I look the other way when you two attach yourselves at the face, but we have a meeting in thirty minutes and I need to talk to you before then."

"Good morning, Brennan," I call out, slipping my arms into my flight jacket.

"Hey, Violet," he answers.

"I have a patrol," Xaden says.

"He does," Garrick adds from somewhere behind Brennan.

"How many people are out here?" I duck under Xaden's arm, and my brows rise. The hallway is packed. Brennan, Garrick, Lewellen, Bodhi, and Imogen are all waiting. The days of negotiation have worn on both Lewellen and Brennan, darkening the circles under Brennan's eyes and thickening the salt-and-pepper stubble on Lewellen's strong jaw, as though he's been too tired or too busy to shave. "Did someone die? Why didn't any of you knock?"

"Because she's mean." Garrick nods toward Imogen, who's leaned up against the wall to my right.

"She needs to fucking sleep." She cocks her head to the side at him. "Given how rested you look, I'm guessing you got plenty of that in Nina Shrensour's bed last night. How disappointing for her."

“Damn.” Bodhi fights to smother a laugh.

A slow smile spreads across Garrick’s face, and a dimple pops in his left cheek. “Careful, Imogen. You sound a little jealous.”

“Who the hell would be jealous of a flier?” Her pointed glare promises a quick death.

“Right.” Brennan rubs the bridge of his nose, and Lewellen walks away, shaking his head. “Look, we just need Riorson.”

“Seriously, figure your shit out, kids. We’re in the middle of a war,” Mira says from the end of the short hallway, her cheeks red and goggle lines still fresh in her skin.

I instantly grin. “You made it!” Thank you, Amari, we have forty-eight hours and a shot.

“I thought you were due back tonight at the earliest.” Brennan raises his reddish eyebrows.

“Teine was feeling spry.” Mira’s smile could cut glass, but at least she’s trying. It took her months to let him back in after she found him alive. Who knows how long she’ll need to get over losing our mother on what she considers to be Brennan’s watch. “I bring news and a few missives.”

I need everyone to leave now so I can know exactly what that news is.

“Thank you,” Brennan says to Mira, then turns to Xaden. “This is more important than patrol.”

Xaden’s hand skims my lower back as he walks into the hall, then follows Brennan to the main hallway, where Lewellen waits, Garrick close on his heels.

“Anything I should know about?” Bodhi asks, two lines appearing between his brows as Mira slings her pack from her shoulder.

“We’re good,” Brennan assures him as the foursome turns the corner and disappears.

“Good to feel needed,” Bodhi mutters, stepping closer as Mira completes our own huddle. “Guess we’ll be taking the patrol, Imogen.”

“Did you figure it out?” I ask Mira, unable to take another second.

“First, Felix sent a gift.” She retrieves a conduit from her bag and hands it to me with a smile.

“Oh, thank the gods.” I sigh with relief as my fingers curl around the metal-rimmed glass orb that gives me a semblance of control over my signet.

“And then there’s this.” That little spark of hope behind my ribs fans straight into a flame when Mira pulls a wooden, runed practice disk from her satchel. “Trissa’s a genius.”

My jaw drops. There are three runes tempered into the disk, one for levitation in the middle, then two in overlapping layers for what appear to be sound-shielding and warmth. The outermost line —warmth—is broken by a small green shoot of new growth. “How did you do it?” It’s almost impossible to keep my tone down.

“After being nearly blown up and hurled like a projectile”—a smile lifts the corners of her mouth —“we altered the material the rune is tempered into without destroying it, truly changing its form. Turns out Kylynn is an agrarian,” Mira says.

“Battle-Ax is a plant wielder?” I whisper.

“You don’t have to whisper, Vi.” Mira grins. “The sound shield is still active even though we nullified the warmth rune. It should cover us to almost the edge of the hall.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I’m sure. It’s cool to the touch, and…” Mira places a gold coin over the center of the levitation rune, and it floats. Nullifying a rune is mind-blowing. Figuring out how to do it without affecting the others? Incredible. “We’ve got it. It’s not without risk, but we can do it.”

My heart starts to pound. “We can save the negotiations.” The fliers will stay, and I can keep my deal with Tecarus.

“If they agree,” Imogen says slowly, “which you know they won’t.”

“Incoming,” Bodhi announces, tilting his chin toward the hallway. Brennan slowly makes his way toward us, his gaze focused on the floor like he’s deep in thought. “We’re heading out.”

“Don’t tell the others yet,” Mira rushes, shoving the disk in her pack at her feet. “We have to give the Senarium a chance to do the right thing, and the fewer people who know, the fewer people who are executed for treason.”

Bodhi and Imogen both nod, and I blink as they start walking away. “Hey, what did you need? Why were you waiting?” I ask Imogen.

Bodhi crams his hands in his pockets and continues walking, and Imogen glances sideways at Brennan as they pass. “Just wanted to make sure you were…getting some sleep,” she calls back as they turn the corner and disappear.

Bodhi. Garrick. Imogen. My stomach tightens. They were checking to make sure Xaden hadn’t killed me.

“You look like shit,” Mira says as Brennan reaches us.

“I feel like shit.” He rubs a hand over his face. “Poromish politics are nothing like ours. I only have a few minutes before I need to get back in there and beg Cygnisen to stay at the table. Neither side speaks the language of middle ground.”

“I would think not wanting to be killed by venin would encourage them to learn quickly,” Mira states, tilting her head just like our mother, which tightens my throat.

“You would think.” He shakes his head. “The only thing everyone can agree on is that the fliers will be allowed to tour the quadrant today with their squads’ first-year riders—apparently they’re not as threatening—and the task force going with you,” he says to me.

“Where exactly is she going?” Mira snaps, moving to my side.

“We’re being sent to find the rest of Andarna’s kind,” I answer for Brennan.

“You what?” Her eyes widen to impossible proportions.

“Andarna wants to. I should have told you before you left, but the Empyrean hadn’t approved it yet.” Guilt thickens my throat at her stricken expression. “She was always going to go. At least Andarna was able to make some demands this way.”

“You let this happen?” She glares at Brennan.

“Mira—” I start.

“Quiet, cadet, the officers are speaking,” she snaps.

Rude.

“Beyond our needs, Queen Maraya hopes the seventh breed might know how to defeat the venin, given the age of Andarna’s egg.” He’s not far off from our own train of thought. “Mira, that hope is all that’s keeping Poromiel at the table, and we’re still negotiating for flier safety and conferencing with Navarre for the Aretian cadets to stay. You know, behind the functioning wards. This is more complicated than it looks.”

Mira bristles. “Simple question: Did you tell them over your dead body is our sister flying through what’s likely enemy-controlled, wyvern-filled territory on a fool’s errand?”

“They should worry more about what will happen when we do find them,” Tairn growls. “If a den of our kind chose to leave—chose to hide—they will not welcome our intrusion.”

“You don’t know that.” Hurt laces Andarna’s argument.

“You are naive to assume otherwise.” His tone sharpens, and Andarna slams our pathways shut. “She needs to prepare herself,” he says. “And so do you. There’s every chance this mission will kill us.”

Or it could save us all. Freaking pessimist.

“He couldn’t say no.” My grip tightens on the conduit. “Aretia needs another of Andarna’s kind to fire their wardstone.”

Mira whips her face toward mine, horror widening her eyes before they quickly narrow back on our brother. “Is that why you sent me off to evaluate the status of the wards? So you’d know how long you have before using our sister like a gaming chip?”

“That is not how it happened.” His jaw ticks. “I’m trying to support what she wants.”

“It’s not happening. We have six months, Brennan!” She digs into her pack and retrieves a bundle of missives, then shoves them at his chest, hitting him right next to his Aisereigh name tag. “Given the rate they’re diminishing, I calculate six months before total collapse if we’re lucky. Finding Andarna’s kind could take decades. By the time she finds them—if she finds them—Aretia’s gone. You’d be risking Violet’s life for nothing.”

My stomach hits the floor. Six months? I figured we’d at least have a year or two before the wards gave out. That path’s timeline just got complicated, but I’ll be damned if Xaden loses his home twice.

“Six months.” Brennan’s gaze darts between Ridoc’s and Rhi’s doors as if he’s performing calculations in his head.

“No. This is the kind of mission riders don’t return from.” Mira draws back, studying our brother like he’s a stranger.

Well, that’s comforting.

“This is bigger than the three of us. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are under attack in Poromiel.” He shoves the missives into his chest pocket and sighs. “Of course I don’t want her in danger, and they won’t let me go with her. I already asked.”

“Find another way.” Mira shakes her head. “You can’t trade Violet’s life for strangers’.”

“Now you sound like Mom.” The words fly from his mouth, and to his credit, he immediately winces when both Mira and I gasp. “Shit.” He hangs his head.

“You dare mention our mother when you won’t even wear it?” She grabs the runed disk from her pack and throws it at our brother, smacking him square in the chest. He fumbles to catch it. “Look at what I’ve been doing this week, Lieutenant Colonel Aisereigh. Not sure Mom would approve.”

Crap. This is not the cool, calm plan we discussed presenting to our brother.

His brows knit as he studies the disk. “I don’t understand.”

“We found a way to keep the fliers at Basgiath safely,” she says.

He keeps looking at it, and I see the moment the truth hits him. The blood drains from his face, and his mouth slackens. “You want to—”

“Yes. And you should find a mirror,” Mira interrupts, earning his attention. “Sacrificing members of our family for what’s considered the greater good is a weapon straight out of Mom’s arsenal.” She walks away without another word.

I pat his shoulder. “Take it to the Senarium.”

“They’ll never agree.”

“You and I both know it’s the only way to forge this alliance.”

He nods. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Chapter 5

Never forget that dragon riders have been selected, trained, and even bred for cruelty. Expecting mercy from a rider is a mistake, for none will be given.

—Chapter One: The Tactical Guide to Defeating Dragons by Colonel Elijah Joben

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A few hours later, I’m pretty sure this has been the longest day of my entire life. The gathering hall is less than a quarter full and the perfect place to wait for news, so that’s what the three of us do while Sawyer naps and the first-years tour with the fliers: sit—with our backs to the wall in case some Navarrian rider decides they want to make a point—and wait for Brennan and Mira to bring news.

Xaden hasn’t returned, either.

Not knowing if more venin could be running around campus is terrifying, but at least if there are, Xaden will sense them. The thought is oddly comforting.

“That venin by Jack’s cell had silver hair,” I mutter, setting my dagger to an apple and peeling it in one long ribbon. “That’s weird, right?”

“Everyone’s hair eventually turns gray. That’s the least weird thing about yesterday’s attack. How long are we supposed to wait to see if they charge us with treason?” Ridoc drums his fingers on the thick oak table. “Let’s just go with plan B already before another group of scarily coordinated dark wielders tries to break Barlowe out again.”

“It’s called plan A for a reason. Be patient,” Rhi lectures from Ridoc’s right, skimming through the book of Tyrrish knotwork Xaden gave me back before I knew it was meant to prepare me for runes. “I highly doubt the Treaty of Aretia was written in a matter of hours.”

“The initial phase was thirteen days of negotiation.” I finish peeling the apple as a first-year comes running through the arched double doors, then set my blade down as the gangly guy makes a beeline to a full table in First Wing’s section, immediately spreading what appears to be a tasty bit of gossip. “When are the first-years going to be done?” I ask.

Whatever rumor First Wing has caught wind of spreads quickly, rippling outward from the center table down the line in a fascinating display of turning heads and scrambling cadets.

“No clue,” Rhi says, turning a page. “I’m just hoping it’s a peaceful bonding experience, since I’m fairly certain there’s some kind of love triangle going on between Avalynn, Baylor, and Kai. Which I normally wouldn’t stress about; it’s not like Aetos cared who any of us were fucking last year—”

“So not true.” Ridoc snorts and shoulder bumps me.

I glance over at the next table to make sure Dain didn’t hear, but he’s clearly engrossed in conversation with a group of third-years, including Imogen and Quinn.

“—but they keep…” Rhi wrinkles her nose. “Squabbling. It isn’t helping integrate the fliers in this hostile environment, and it’s screwing with their interpersonal dynamics.”

Ridoc’s fingers pause, and he takes note of the pattern I’ve been watching. News spreads from person to person, and riders start scurrying out of the hall. “You seeing this?”

I nod and sheathe my dagger, leaving my apple uneaten. “Rhi.”

She closes the book and looks up.

“You think they’ll win?” a brunette in Third Wing asks excitedly, slamming her pewter mug down on the table across from us.

“No fucking way. It’ll be a bloodbath,” the guy next to her replies, catching my gaze and quickly averting his as he gets up from the table, grabbing his flight jacket and abandoning his drink.

“Something’s happening.” A quick glance down the tables makes my skin crawl. The only riders left in the gathering hall are Aretian.

All three of us rise as a stocky cadet barrels through the double doors, and I spot first-year rank and his name tag, Norris, a second before he throws his hood back, revealing his familiar face.

“Baylor?” Apprehension slithers between my shoulder blades at the panic in our squadmate’s brown eyes, the worry creasing the dark-brown skin of his forehead.

“They’re here!” he shouts over his shoulder, and Sloane races in behind him.

I grab my jacket and slip out from behind the table to meet the first-years in the middle of the gathering hall. “What’s wrong?”

“You have to do something.” Sloane stares past me to Rhiannon. She hasn’t been able to look me in the eye since she siphoned the life out of my mother. “First Wing grabbed one of Tail Section’s fliers in the courtyard, and they’re forcing a challenge.”

My stomach hurtles to the floor. If so much as a drop of flier blood is shed, it could end the peace talks.

“Beinhaven’s insisting at knifepoint,” Baylor all but growls.

A wingleader is orchestrating this? There aren’t enough four-letter words in the world. Article Four, Section Four…we need another wingleader.

“Let’s move,” Rhiannon orders, and they sprint toward the door, Ridoc sliding past me as I turn back to the third-years.

“Dain!” I shout, and his head jerks up, his familiar brown eyes finding me instantly. “We need you.” Without waiting for his response, I take off after my squad, shoving my arms into my coat.

Dain catches up before we hit the far side of commons, and the rest of the Aretian riders aren’t far behind him.

We burst through the doorway of the rotunda into the courtyard, and my gaze sweeps over the crowd, taking stock of the situation. There’s a clear division in the mass gathered in front of the dais, with most Navarrian riders standing to the left, at least half of them wearing sickening smirks while Caroline Ashton appears to take bets near the far staircase. The rest hold back the angry crowd of Aretian riders and fliers arguing directly in front of—

My heart lurches into my throat.

Aura Beinhaven stands centered in front of the crowd, holding one of the daggers she usually keeps strapped to her upper arms against the tan neck of a terrified first-year flier.

And there's no leadership in sight.

"Find your squads and de-escalate at all costs," Dain orders over his shoulder as we race down the steps and into the swarm.

"If only we were taught those techniques," Ridoc mutters.

"They're at the front. Follow me," Baylor tells us, then pushes through the crush like it's nothing, leaving us an easy wake to follow in. The snow has stopped, only to be replaced by a bitter chill as the sun sinks behind the mountains.

"Let him go!" Cat's voice rises above the others as we reach the front of the crowd, and when Baylor steps aside, I spot Maren holding Cat back from the line of Navarrian riders guarding Aura, her arms hooked around her best friend's waist.

"Feel free to accept the challenge, since he won't." A third-year out of Second Wing holds the tip of her sword less than a foot from Cat's stomach.

"Happy to!" she shouts.

Holy shit, this place is a tinderbox just waiting for a single flame to set it ablaze.

Palming a dagger, I move before my common sense can get the better of me and put myself in front of Cat, lifting my chin at the third-year. "This isn't how we treat our fellow cadets."

"They're not cadets!" she sneers.

"I didn't hear you complaining when they were carting your little sister to the infirmary during the battle." Imogen's shoulder rubs against mine as she edges in, urging me back. "But if you're going to raise blades"—she draws her sword—"then you'll do so against someone your own year, Kaveh."

Quinn pushes through on my other side, forcing Neve—one of our third-year fliers—behind her and setting the head of her labrys on the ground, squaring off against a guy out of First Wing who seems twice her height. "I kicked your ass our first year, and I don't mind doing it again, Hedley."

I take the opportunity and spin, putting my forearm at Cat's collarbone and forcing her back into the safety of our squad.

"I'll fight!" she shrieks.

“You can’t.” I grasp Cat’s forearm with my empty hand. “Cat, you can’t. If you fall—”

“You’d be so sad to lose your rival, wouldn’t you?” Her dark eyes narrow on mine. “Or are you more intimidated by the thought that I could win and once again prove why I’m the better match for—”

“Oh, shut up.” It takes everything I have not to shake her. “You can’t wield behind the wards, so stop trying to manipulate my emotions. There’s no winning here. If you bleed, we have no chance at an alliance, and I’m not willing to lose a squadmate over Second Wing’s assholery. You win and harm a rider, you’ll confirm everything they fear about you.”

Her expression softens, and for a second, she looks just like her older sister. “They’re never going to accept us.”

“They don’t have to,” I assure her. “We already have.”

“Challenge! Challenge! Challenge!” The chant comes from the left and quickly catches along the row of Navarrian riders.

Shit. Nothing like mob mentality.

“This coward won’t accept the challenge of a senior wingleader!” Aura shouts over the crowd, using lesser magic to amplify her voice. “But I’ll be merciful and accept another. Pick your champion or watch him die.”

“This goes against the Codex!” Dain elbows a Navarrian cadet from Third Wing in the head and pushes through the line. “Challenges are only issued in the presence of a combat master.”

“On what authority do you object, Aetos?” Aura snarls.

The crowd quiets, but the silence feels more dangerous than the chanting had been as everyone turns to watch the interaction.

“Stay here,” I order Cat, then shove my way between Imogen and Quinn.

“Article Four, Section Four.” Dain approaches Aura with his hands up, exposing his palms. “‘A wingleader has the authority and duty to maintain—’”

“Article Two, Section One,” Aura shouts, raking the edge of her dagger along the flier’s throat. “‘Riders outside quadrant chain of command can’t interfere with cadet matters.’ You are no longer in the chain of command.”

The Navarrian riders mutter in agreement, and tension rises like the bubbles in a simmering pot, one degree away from boiling. The quadrant has made us far too comfortable shedding each other’s blood.

My grip tightens on my dagger as color fills my peripheral vision. I look up to see both gryphons and dragons landing along the thick stone walls of the courtyard.

Great, just what we need in this situation: fire and talons.

“Are you here?” I ask. There are no black scales among the dragons, but I spot Cath behind the dais.

“Are you in danger?” Tairn asks, and I feel Andarna’s presence, but she remains silent.

“Not exactly, but—”

“Then I trust you can handle it.”

“Injuring a flier will jeopardize this alliance,” Dain argues, and I nod like he needs the encouragement.

“Who said we want it?” Aura drags the edge of her blade under the flier’s chin, and he winces but doesn’t move. “They haven’t crossed the parapet. They haven’t climbed the Gauntlet. They won’t even accept a challenge. We do not tolerate cowards!”

The Navarrian riders cheer, and I use the opportunity to dart between the two standing guard in front of us, finding myself quickly flanked by Ridoc on my left and, surprisingly, Aaric on my right. The first-year is almost as tall as Xaden, and his menacing glare keeps Kaveh and Hedley silent as they stand with Quinn’s and Imogen’s weapons at their backs.

“I’ll accept!” Kai shouts, the first-year flier charging through the line on the right, and every head turns as Rhi and Baylor quickly drag him back.

Bone crunches ahead of us, and my focus whips to Dain, who shoves Tail Section’s flier toward the line as Aura stumbles backward, disarmed, blood streaming through her fingers as she covers her nose.

“This ends now!” Dain’s shout echoes off the stone walls.

“We don’t answer to deserters!” Aura spits blood into the snow and straightens. “You no longer speak for Fourth Wing, Aetos. You’re nothing here.”

Dain takes the insult with a lift of his chin, and I crack open the door to Tairn’s power, welcoming the heat that floods my veins, warming my cold-cramped muscles and exposed hands.

“Fourth Wing!” Ewan Faber steps out of the crowd near the steps. “Prepare to defend your senior wingleader!”

“Fuck me,” Aaric mutters, drawing his sword as Ridoc does the same at my left.

Weapons rise at the edges of my vision, but I keep my gaze locked on Aura and adjust my grip around my dagger. I may have some very mixed feelings when it comes to Dain, but there’s no way under Amari’s sky that I’m going to let Aura harm any Aretian rider, let alone my oldest friend.

“We answer to Aetos,” Ridoc shouts down the line, pointing his sword in Faber’s direction. “And there’s more of us than there are of you.”

“Only in Fourth Wing!” Iris Drue announces, the leader of First Wing moving to Faber’s side. “First Wing stands strong! Stands loyal to Navarre!”

A cheer rises from the left.

“Not sure I’d brag about being in the wing that produced Jack Barlowe!” Ridoc counters.

“Ridoc!” Rhi hisses.

“I’m done,” he promises as Dain shoots a glare his way.

“Really missing the professors right now,” Aaric says under his breath.

“Challenge Aetos!” someone yells from the left, and a new fear wraps its fingers around my heart and squeezes. There’s no single person in the courtyard with the authority to command us all. The only thing more dangerous than a quadrant full of arrogant killing machines is a leaderless quadrant, and if Dain accepts the challenge and…falls, an alliance with Poromiel won’t matter—we’ll tear each other apart from within.

Now would be a great time for Xaden to lower his fucking shields.

“The Dark One cannot unite what he broke.”

“Stop calling him that.”

“You blame us for Barlowe, but you’re the ones who left!” Aura motions at our side of the formation, displaying her bevy of patches beneath the one that indicates her fire-wielding signet as she stalks toward Dain.

Dain draws his dagger and drops it in the snow, facing Aura unarmed. “I’m not raising my blade against you, Beinhaven.”

“That’s a…choice,” Aaric says quietly. “He’s going to talk her down?”

One by one, I flex my fingers along the hilt of my dagger, prepping my hand for movement as power hums within me.

“Yes, we left,” Dain continues, his hands closing into fists. “But we also returned.”

Aura reaches for her shoulder as if forgetting she already used and lost that dagger, but she doesn’t draw the sword at her hip. “Did it occur to any of you that they only attacked because they knew we weren’t at full strength? That your desertion allowed the wards to fall in the first place?”

Ouch.

“We chose truth,” Dain shouts back, a vein bulging in his neck. “We chose to defend the helpless —”

“You chose to break the riot! Fracture the quadrant!” Aura counters, pointing her gloved finger at Dain’s chest as she approaches him with slow, methodical steps that elevate my pulse. “And then you bring home the very enemy we’ve spent centuries fighting, the enemy that killed my own cousin in one of their raids! And you think we should welcome them into the heart of the kingdom they’ve been trained to destroy?”

The Navarrians mutter in agreement.

“I think our boy is losing this one,” Aaric whispers. “He’s good, but he’s no Riorson.”

Xaden hadn’t just led Fourth Wing, he’d commanded the respect—and fear—of the entire quadrant. My jaw clenches. But he isn’t a cadet anymore, and the entirety of the Riders Quadrant will only answer to one of its own. He can’t unite what he broke.

“Xaden can’t fix this,” I murmur, mostly to myself. Fuck it, I hate when Tairn’s right.

Mercifully, he keeps silent.

“We need the fliers!” Dain holds his ground.

“You need them!” Aura’s voice edges on bitterness as she takes another step toward Dain. “We fought to save Basgiath! We were steadfast in our defense! We never wavered!” Another chorus of cheers resounds as she turns to the quadrant like a politician.

“He can’t win the crowd. She’s going to really challenge him,” Aaric warns, his gaze darting over the audience of dragons and gryphons, and I suddenly remember exactly who he is.

“Any chance you have an affinity for public speaking?” I ask Aaric, undoing the first button on my flight jacket as the heat builds. “It certainly runs in your family.”

“Was it the shunning of my birthright in favor of a high probability of death that gave me away?” he responds, his tone dry.

I take that as a no.

“What do you say? Their strongest against our strongest?” Aura taps her bloody hand over her heart. “I’ll make you a deal, wingleader. Defeat me, and your fliers live to see the morning. Fail to rise to the occasion, and we’ll stain this courtyard red.”

The Navarrians’ roar of approval rattles my teeth.

“Dain isn’t the strongest,” Andarna points out.

“Dain can take her in hand-to-hand.” Nepotism isn’t the only reason he earned his rank, and wielding isn’t allowed in challenges. I watch every motion as Aura tugs at the fingers of her glove instead of reaching for another dagger or her sword. My stomach tenses. There’s only one reason she’d need her hands bare.

Fire trumps memory-wielding every time.

Aura gestures to the hard-packed snow between them. “Let this serve as our mat. What would our combat master say?” she asks the crowd.

“Begin!” the whole of First Wing calls out.

“I’m not fighting you, Aura!” Dain roars.

“I’m fighting you!” Aura fidgets with her glove, and I flip my dagger, holding it by the tip. “Or have you really turned coward? Just another rebel who needs to be marked as such?”

Marked. Rage narrows my eyes.

“Dain isn’t the strongest!” Andarna repeats, and this time, I get the point.

I am.

Aura whips off her glove and flares her hand. I throw, releasing my dagger a second before flame erupts from her palm.

The steel pins her glove to the wooden support of the dais.

Aura gasps, and the flame dies before it can touch Dain, her head tracking the loss of her glove before whipping toward me. Her eyes narrow. “Sorrengail.”

“Violet, no,” Dain protests.

“‘Rebel’ is so…outdated. We prefer the term ‘revolutionary,’” I inform Aura, taking a measured step in her direction and welcoming the crackle of sizzling power in my fingertips. “And if you’re going to wield, then it’s me you’ll be dealing with.”

Chapter 6

Never turn your back on a rider.

—Major Afendra's Guide to the Riders Quadrant (Unauthorized Edition)

"You dare—" Aura turns to fully face me, yanking off her other glove.

"I dare." I lift my open palms skyward, and heat streaks along my arms as I release a wave of power, forcing it upward and letting it go.

Lightning splits the sky, flashing bright above our heads and branching outward into the clouds. Thunder follows instantly, so loud it shakes the masonry.

The crowd quiets, and Aura's mouth hangs for a moment before she lowers her hands.

"You see, Dain's too honorable to wield in a challenge, but you'll find that my sense of morality has learned to…waver." I retrieve another dagger and shake it in her direction. "You lift your hand against him again, and the next one goes through it. He's the reason you're alive. The reason you're all alive!" Power thrums through me, buzzing with readiness, and I slip my left hand into the pocket of my flight jacket and remove the conduit.

"Violet," Rhiannon warns softly from my right.

"Shh, it's more fun when she blows shit up," Ridoc whispers.

I turn slightly and draw on lesser magic to allow my voice to carry to the Navarrian riders while keeping an eye on Aura. They've closed in, taking this situation from dangerous to lethal. "The only reason you survived the attack is because we gained access to the knowledge Navarre purposely hid from us. We stole it. We translated it. We saved your ass." Warmth streaks down my arm, the conduit beginning to hum. "And yes, we expect you to recognize that we need this alliance to survive what's coming for us!"

"You expect us to trust them?" Caroline calls out.

Aura retreats a step, eyeing my conduit.

“You have to,” I answer, pushing against the heat that flushes my skin as power gathers within me again. “But more importantly, you can. They’ve fought by our side for months, even after we’ve spent centuries condemning their people to death because we’re unwilling to share the one resource that could have saved them. We don’t have to like each other, but we do have to trust each other, and we can’t keep doing this, can’t keep accepting needless casualties in the quadrant in the name of strengthening the wing, not when every single one of us is needed in this war.”

“It’s their war!” Aura challenges. “Do you really believe we should weaken our wards, endanger our own people just to arm theirs? You choose Poromiel over Navarre?”

“We can choose both.” I slip my dagger back into place and free my hand to wield.

Aaric lifts his sword as Ewan Faber comes a little too close.

“The riders who came before us failed to protect the innocent just because they were on the other side of our border,” I argue. “They lied and hid. They were the cowards! But we don’t have to be. We can choose to stand together and fight. Leadership is locked behind doors right now trying to forge a treaty.” My gaze skims over the riders who stayed when we fled for Aretia three months ago. “But they’re failing, just like every generation before us has failed, and if we do the same…” I shake my head, fumbling for words. “You’ve seen what’s out there. Either this alliance begins right here with us, with our generation, or we will be the last dragon riders and gryphon fliers on the Continent.” Sweat beads along the back of my neck, my temperature rising with every second I keep my power ready. “Well?” I ask.

Silence falls, thick and heavy, but no one moves.

“Is this what you do when we give you a break from classes?”

Everyone turns toward the rotunda at the sound of Devera’s voice. The professor stands with her feet braced apart, flanked by Professors Emetterio and Kaori. All three look in desperate need of a bath and a good night’s rest.

Thank you, Dunne. I force the Archives door to Tairn’s power shut and note the steam rising from my hand before the conduit dims.

“Sorrengail is right,” Devera shouts. “There is every chance we will all meet Malek in the coming months, but you must decide if you’d rather die fighting each other or facing our shared enemy.” She rocks back on her heels. “Go ahead and choose. We’ll wait.”

“Die now or die later, what’s the difference?” someone from Second Wing asks.

“Die now, and the scribes will call your name in the morning.” Emetterio shrugs. “Choose to fight your common enemy, and there’s a chance you’ll live to graduate. Personally”—he scratches his beard—“I like our odds. The last time a shadow and lightning wielder fought side by side, they managed to drive the venin back into the Barrens for a few hundred years. We’ll figure out how to do it again.”

I fumble the conduit and nearly drop it. Xaden and I are the first of our signets to live simultaneously since the Great War?

Heads turn my way, and one by one, every weapon lowers.

“You do your dragons—and gryphons—proud.” Devera nods. “Vacation is over. Your professors are returning in the next twenty-four hours, and if I were you, I’d concentrate on getting a good night’s sleep before Emetterio here decides you should run the Gauntlet just for fun. We are done waiting for the nobles. Battle Brief is at nine a.m. sharp, treaty or no treaty.” She looks pointedly at our group. “And that includes every cadet, no matter what color leathers you prefer. You’re released from whatever it was you thought you were doing here.”

The cadets disperse, passing by our professors as the three walk our way, and then the winged ones take to the sky. I can’t help but note that the cadets are still separated between Navarrians and Aretians. At least no one’s trying to kill each other.

We keep our fliers’ backs toward the dais until the Navarrians are gone, and then our squad brings up the rear.

“I can see it sometimes,” Cat says, pulling up her hood as she walks ahead of me. “Why he chose you. Nice speech. Took you long enough to step in, though.”

“You’re welcome,” I mutter to her back, but the tiniest of smiles curls my lips.

“Never thought I’d yearn for a simple day of classes.” Ridoc throws his arm over my shoulder as we walk. “Maybe a good old session of Parapet.”

I spot Xaden off to the side of the rotunda steps with Lewellen, Brennan, and Mira, and my stomach flips. They must have news.

“Our classmates trying to kill each other isn’t exactly original,” Sloane says, passing by as I slow at the tense look on Brennan’s face.

Guess it’s not good news.

“Did you really just stand there and watch all that happen?” Rhi asks as our professors approach.

“Yes.” Devera wipes off her flight goggles, then stretches the leather band behind her head. “It was bound to happen at some point, and at least this was a controlled environment,” she finishes over her shoulder.

“I feel so protected.” Ridoc puts his hand over his heart. “Nurtured, even. Wouldn’t you agree, Violet?”

“You pretty much described how Violet was raised,” Dain says, coming from behind us with Aaric as the rest head inside with the remainder of the squad. He looks at me. “Thanks for stepping in. Thought she was going to torch me there for a second.”

“Thanks for coming without hesitation when I said we needed you.” Our eyes meet, and for a second, it hits me how different things might have been if he’d shown the same faith in me during my first year as he did today. Not different enough to change the way I feel about Xaden, though.

“Always will.” He offers me a hint of a smile before turning toward the dormitory.

When I look over to Xaden, I find him watching, his scarred eyebrow rising as his gaze jumps to Dain before finding mine again.

My eyes narrow. Is that… No, it can’t be jealousy, can it?

Rhi glances at Ridoc and Aaric, motioning with her head. “Violet, we’ll catch up with you later.”

“We need to speak with you as well, Aaric,” Brennan notes, looking like he’s aged five years in the last few hours. He’s not exactly standing close to Mira, either, causing my heart to sink.

Ridoc’s arm slides off my shoulders. “Oh, come on. Why does Aaric get to stay? He’s a first-year.”

“Do not make me drag you,” Rhi warns, holding up a single finger, and Ridoc acquiesces with a sigh, moving forward and leaving the six of us on the rotunda steps.

“Let’s take this inside.” Brennan surprises me by heading down the steps and cutting a diagonal path toward the academic wing.

Moving to Xaden’s side, I study the stern lines of his face as we follow Brennan, the others close behind us. “Everything all right?” I ask quietly, feeling his shields locked firmly in place. “Are you all right?”

“Good speech.” He takes my hand, lacing our fingers.

“She was going to kill Dain.” My voice drops to a whisper. “They really do hate us.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that we’re here. Especially now that we’ve reached terms for the riot to stay.” Xaden catches the door before it can close behind Brennan, then holds it as I walk through, his fingers slipping from mine.

“That’s good, right?” I glance his way as we enter the deserted sparring gym. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Talk to your brother first.” He folds his arms when we reach the edge of the first row of mats, where Brennan waits. As the others join us, we form a loose circle.

That doesn’t bode well. Anxiety coils in my stomach like a snake poised to strike as I take in the older riders’ somber expressions across from us.

Aaric slides his hands into his pockets at my left. “Let me guess. Halden complicated negotiations?”

I fucking blanch.

“Your brother certainly didn’t help,” Lewellen notes, scratching the bristles along the underside of his jaw.

“Halden’s here?” I manage to ask.

“Rode in this morning with a company from the Western Guard.” Aaric shoots me a knowing look, which I return with a quick glare.

“Great.” His temper is the last thing we need at the negotiating table.

Mira studies Xaden and me intently, but she keeps quiet.

“Your secret is still safe, by the way,” Lewellen says to Aaric, “though you might consider putting your father out of his misery. He has half his personal guard searching for you.”

“Shows how effective they are, don’t you think?” Aaric grimaces sarcastically. “So do you carry news? Or were you just gathered to hear Violet’s speech?” His attention jumps from person to person, no doubt cataloging the tiniest details of every shift in expression as he’s been raised to do. He’s always been the most observant of his brothers. “She was quite moving.”

“We heard.” Brennan offers me a flash of a proud smile. “And saw.”

“She’d be a great politician,” Aaric continues. “Or a general, maybe? Definitely nobility.”

“With that speech? At least a duchess.” Xaden shifts his weight, brushing his elbow against my shoulder.

I shake my head. “No thank you to…any of that. I have no love for politics, nor am I good at dealing with the Senarium.” I look around. “Okay, someone needs to start talking.”

“Lieutenant Riorson?” a rider with a messenger sash interrupts, calling out from the doorway.

“Be right back.” Xaden’s hand skims my lower back as he answers the summons.

“Your mission was discussed at the negotiating table today in hopes they would give us an extension,” Brennan says, “and given the participants at hand…”

That snake of anxiety strikes hard and true.

“Halden,” Aaric guesses, his emerald-green eyes narrowing slightly in speculation toward my brother. “Halden’s going with her, isn’t he?”

My jaw unhinges, then snaps shut at the apology filling Brennan’s eyes. “No fucking way.” I shake my head. “You cannot be serious.” I refuse to even think about it.

“They’re serious,” Aaric says without looking in my direction. “Poromiel would accept a Sorrengail without question, so if you need a royal capable of speaking for Navarre, they must think you’re headed to the isle kingdoms or northward.” He tilts his head, studying the older riders. “That about cover it?”

I’m going to be sick.

“Why are you ill?” Andarna asks.

“Halden?” Tairn muses slowly, and I swear I can feel his nonexistent eyebrows rise.

“So, we kill him if he makes her uncomfortable,” Andarna suggests. “Problem solved.”

“You cannot kill the heir to the throne.” Even though I’ve been tempted myself a time or two.

“You really are the wisest of them, aren’t you?” Lewellen huffs a sardonic laugh. “Our kingdom would have benefitted from you being the firstborn, Your Highness.”

“It’s Aaric,” he corrects, folding his arms. “Is that why you wanted me here? To see if I’d announce myself, since Halden wants to go gallivanting off on dangerous missions? Make everyone feel good and cozy that there’s still a spare?”

“Perhaps.” The duke smiles at Aaric.

“Admirable attempt, but I’m only here for my squad. I’ll dismantle the family business before I rejoin it,” Aaric quips.

“Your prince doesn’t want to play.” Mira arches a brow at Lewellen. “Now, tell Violet the rest, or I will.”

The comment reminds me: “Andarna’s demands?”

“Right,” Lewellen says as Xaden returns, still stern-faced but now holding a rolled parchment as he fills the space at my side. The duke pulls Andarna’s list from his pocket. “You already know point two is now in the hands of Captain Grady. But you won point three. The Senarium has agreed that all those who flew for Aretia will be welcomed back with a full pardon for their treason and sedition within the now-negotiated accord with Aretia”—he glances at Xaden—“which will be signed in the morning once the scribes finish drafting it. Personally, I think you scared the shit out of them by threatening to leave yesterday, Violet. Good job. Point four, Andarna will not submit for any examination—”

“Because that was never going to happen anyway,” she chimes in.

“And five, she will be granted access to hunt in the king’s forest whenever she pleases.”

“That one was just for fun.”

“You skipped the fliers.” I straighten my spine and look to my brother. “Keeping them safe and our squads intact is first on the list.” I narrow my eyes. We only have two days left. And we gave you

the solution.

Brennan presses his lips into a flat line, and my stomach rolls.

“That particular matter didn’t make it to Poromiel’s table.” Lewellen folds Andarna’s list and puts it into the front pocket of his hunter green tunic. “Your sister argued valiantly and displayed astonishing capability, but the Senarium voted six to one, and the safety of Navarre’s borders is not to be tampered with.”

Mira crosses her arms.

Prickling heat rolls down Andarna’s bond, and my hands curl, my nails biting into my palms. “What about the alliance?” Without it, the deal with Tecarus falls apart.

“It’s failed,” Lewellen announces unemotionally, as if reading from the death roll.

“Because the fliers aren’t safe here.” I bite out every word at my brother.

“Because treaties like this take time, and we won’t figure this out before their queen’s deadline in two days.” Brennan rubs his thumb along his chin. “Flier cadets will be safe in Aretia while we still have wards, and hopefully Queen Maraya can force her nobles back to the table at a later date,” Brennan promises, his shoulders sagging. “Politics are complicated.”

Fuck that. How can our nobles let them walk away without an alliance, knowing we have the means to protect the fliers?

“We still have the means,” Andarna reminds me.

Right. Plan B: treason. Guess that path chooses itself.

“When you put it that way.” I force my shoulders to relax and my hands to fall peacefully at my sides. “I guess it’s back to Basgiath business as usual tomorrow, and I should prep for our mission—or is research as out of my control as the team members?”

Mira’s eyes narrow in my direction, like she’s the inntinnsic in the room and not Xaden.

“Every resource, including the royal library, will be made available to you,” Brennan promises.

“Oh good, because books will keep her safe.” Mira shoots Brennan an icy look.

The right books will.

“Well, as fun as this has been.” Aaric nods at me, then departs without another word.

“He’ll come around.” Lewellen sighs, then turns to Xaden with a smile so proud it borders on teary. “Enjoy your win, Xaden. Delaying the alliance is unfortunate, but we won. Your father would be proud.”

“I highly doubt that.” His tone is sharp.

What? I reach, but his shields are tighter than ever. Did he get his father’s sword back? Why wouldn’t he be happy about that?

“We’ll leave you to tell her the good news. I really am sorry we couldn’t make the alliance work.” Brennan gives me an awkward, apologetic smile, then heads out, taking Lewellen and Mira with him.

I wait until the door shuts behind her before I turn to Xaden. “What did you win?”

Every muscle in his body seems to tense even more, if that’s possible. “I didn’t win it. Didn’t even ask for it. I’m the last person…” He shakes his head and stuffs the rolled orders into his breast pocket. “Lewellen and Lindell told them it was the price of keeping the riot here, and the Senarium gave in. That’s how scared they are of losing our numbers. They actually agreed to give it back, and I wish they hadn’t. Not now. Not when I’m like…this.” He points to his eyes as if they were still red, but I only see him. “My father wouldn’t be proud. He’d be horrified.” Every word is short. Clipped.

“I don’t believe that.” It’s impossible not to be proud of him, not to love him.

“You didn’t know him. There was only one thing in this world he loved more than me.” He looks away, and I start to rethink my assumption about the sword.

“What did the king give you?” A blade wouldn’t worry him like this.

“I’ve been trying to think of a way out of it for the last hour. The king sanctioned both Lindell and Lewellen for their roles in hiding Aretia—just like they predicted this morning—so they’re not options. And I can’t reject the agreement, or everyone will know something is wrong.” His tortured gaze finds mine, and my heart clenches. “The only solution I can think of is you. You’ll be the first to sense when I lose the rest of what makes me…me.” Slowly, he tucks a windblown strand of my hair behind my ear.

“You won’t.” I have enough faith in him for the both of us.

“I will. This morning showed me it’s just a matter of time and reason.” He nods with a certainty that sours my stomach. “It’s not fair, and you might hate me for it later, but I need you to make me a promise.” His warm hand cups the back of my neck as his eyes search mine. “Swear you’ll sound the alarm if I go too far, that you’ll keep it safe, even if it’s from me.”

“What—” I start, but the gym door opens, and I look over my shoulder to see Garrick waving a rolled parchment.

“The Earl of Lewellen said you’d be in here. Orders aren’t optional, Riorson, even for nobility. We need to go.”

“Promise me,” Xaden says, stroking his thumb under my ear and completely ignoring his best friend.

“You’re leaving?” I swing my gaze back to Xaden’s, realizing that’s why the messenger had tracked him down. “Now?”

He leans in, blocking out the rest of the world. “Promise me, Violet. Please.”

He’ll never go too far, never lose his soul, so I nod. “I promise.”

Xaden’s eyes slide shut for a heartbeat, and blatant relief shines from their depths when he opens them. “Thank you.”

“I know you can hear me.” Garrick raises his voice. “Let’s go.”

“I love you.” Xaden kisses me hard and fast, and it’s over before I can even process it’s actually happened.

“I love you, too.” I grab his hand as he withdraws. “Tell me what the king gave you.”

He takes a deep breath. “He gave me back my title and the seat in the Senarium.”

Holy shit. My lips part.

“Not just Aretia, either…he gave me Tyrrendor,” Xaden says slowly, like he can’t believe it, either.

And he doesn’t want it. My chest clenches. “Xaden—”

“Don’t wait up.” He presses a kiss to the inside of my wrist, then strides toward Garrick. “I’ll be back by eight a.m. to sign that accord,” he calls back over his shoulder. “Try to stay out of trouble while I’m gone.”

“Be careful.” He’s the Duke of Tyrrendor. This is so much bigger than how I feel about him now. There’s an entire province depending on him.

I need to find a cure, and that means saving the alliance tonight…

Even if it means I’ll be a traitor by morning.

Chapter 7

If I’m to be court-martialed for helping Braxtyn defend his people, then I shall welcome the trial. All who channel from dragon and gryphon alike should flourish under the wards, and now Aretia will be that haven should one of the others ever return.

—Journal of Lyra of Morraine

—Translated by Cadet Jesinia Neilwart

“Iwant to be on the quest squad,” Ridoc whispers at my side as we cross the enclosed bridge to the Healer Quadrant, my heart strangely steady considering what we’re about to do.

“For the last time, there’s no quest squad,” Rhi hisses at him as the bells announce midnight’s arrival, muffling the sound of rusty hinges as Imogen opens the door ahead of us. “There’s a very small, very skilled group going with Violet to find Andarna’s kind.”

“Sounds like a quest squad to me. Given Riorson’s recent promotion, he should be able to pull some strings with Grady, right?” Ridoc checks over the daggers sheathed along his right side, like he’s afraid he might have missed one. Hopefully we won’t need them. “What do we all think?”

“I think you should shut the hell up before you get us caught and killed,” Imogen says over her shoulder, walking into the mage-lit tunnel.

Ridoc rolls his eyes and glances in my direction as we cross into the Healer Quadrant. “Still sounds like a quest squad.”

“If I had a say, I’d take you,” I promise, pulling the door shut once we’re all inside.

The tunnel is empty—all the beds have been cleared since yesterday morning’s attack, which feels like a decade ago. We find the darkest stretch between mage lights and lean against the wall just out of sight of the infirmary doors.

“Now we wait,” Rhi mutters, drumming her fingertips on her folded arms.

It isn’t long before we spot Bodhi and Quinn making their way toward us from the opposite direction with Maren in their wake, pillow lines etched on her face.

“You ready to do this?” Bodhi asks me, keeping his voice down as he reaches us. “You really want to do this?”

“No second thoughts,” I assure him, lifting my chin. “Whatever it takes.”

He nods and glances over our party. “Everyone know their assignment?”

“I don’t,” Maren whispers, looking at us like we’ve lost our minds. “Is this some kind of hazing ritual?”

“It’s best you don’t know until we need you.” I pull the vial of concentrated, purple valerian root tincture from my left pocket. “It’s for your own safety—and plausible deniability—that you trust us. For now, just stay here with Imogen.”

Maren glances at each of us as if deciding, then nods.

“Then let’s go.” Bodhi gestures toward the infirmary, and I take the lead.

Gods, I hope I've thought of everything. If one thing goes wrong, we're fucked.

The five of us approach the infirmary doors, and I knock lightly four times. Please be here.

"Remind me how you know this guy?" Bodhi whispers.

"I saved his life during navigation last year," I answer, then hold my breath as the right door opens silently.

Dyre pops his head out, his brown eyes crinkling as he smiles. "I did everything you asked. Come on in." He holds the door open, and we all slip inside as quietly as possible.

"Thank you for taking the extra shift on quick notice and helping us." I hand him the vial. "Here's another dose in case you need it. The other healers have to stay asleep until we bring him back."

"Understood." He takes the vial. "But you know I can't do anything if someone comes out of the critical care chamber."

"It's a risk we have to take." We leave him standing watch at the door and silently make our way down the row to Sawyer's bay, mage lights casting multiple shadows as we pass the sleeping injured.

Sawyer's sitting upright but doesn't say a word as we pile into his brightly lit bay, just lifts his eyebrows and sets down his pen and parchment on the bedside table.

Bodhi closes the curtains and throws out a line of blue energy that encapsulates us in a bubble. "Sound shield is active. You feeling up to a trip across campus?" he asks Sawyer.

"Took one earlier today as part of rehab. I can make it for the right reason." Sawyer nods. "Is this why Dyre told me to stay awake?"

"We need you to help with that plan we discussed." I take the seat near the head of his bed. "Mira found a way. It involves altering the very material a rune is tempered into without destroying it."

He leans back against his headboard. "Then you're fucked, because I can't think of a single rock or earth wielder in our history."

"I'm pretty sure it's mostly iron," I say slowly.

His mouth falls open and hangs there for a few seconds. “No.” He shakes his head, then looks to Rhi. “Find someone else. There are at least a dozen metallurgists in our ranks.” He folds his arms over his black shirt.

“Not here.” Ridoc moves to the other side of the bed, then rummages through a set of drawers. “They’re all stationed on the border with just about every other rider we have right now.”

“Then wait for them,” Sawyer argues. “I’m…I’m not good enough for something like that.”

“You have to be.” Rhi sits at the foot of his bed.

“Sliseag won’t even…” He shoves his hand through his unruly brown hair. “I don’t know if I can.”

“You can.” I lift my brows and look pointedly at the mug on his bedside table that bears his handprint.

“I am not the rider you want for this, Vi. Not sure I’m even a rider anymore. Wait for someone else.”

“Waiting won’t matter,” Bodhi says beside Rhi.

Sawyer’s shoulders sag. “Leadership doesn’t approve.”

I shake my head. “If we don’t do this tonight, the negotiations are done. Fliers will be escorted to Aretia tomorrow.”

“They’re going to tear our squad apart?” Sawyer’s gaze jumps from me, to Bodhi, to Rhi, as if hoping one of us will correct him.

“Not if you do something about it.” Ridoc tosses Sawyer’s uniform top on the bed. “Now, I love you like a brother, and I get that you lost your leg, and we respect however you’re feeling about that, but you’re still one of us. You’re still a rider, with all the benefits and shit that come with wearing black. So with all the love in my heart, put your fucking uniform on, because we need you.”

Sawyer picks up his uniform and rubs his thumb over his metallurgy patch, then down across his Iron Squad one. My heart counts out the long seconds it takes for him to nod. “Someone hand me my crutches.”

A few minutes later, five of us walk out of the infirmary, including Sawyer.

“Where’s Quinn?” Maren asks, pushing off the wall.

“Making sure no one notices he’s missing,” Bodhi answers.

“Good to see you dressed appropriately,” Imogen says to Sawyer. “It’s a long way, including two sets of intentionally difficult stairs, so if you need help, we’ve got you.”

Sawyer glances down to where Ridoc tied up his empty pantleg to the knee. “Noted,” he says with quiet determination. “Let’s go.”

We make our way up the spiral steps into the main campus, then down the hallway to the northwest turret, narrowly missing one guard patrol in infantry blue by ducking into a healer classroom midway, and then another in scarlet tunics by piling into the stairwell as they turn the corner.

“It’s busy out here,” Sawyer remarks between quick breaths, his back pressed against the stone wall. Sweat beads his forehead, and he’s lost a little color.

“You good?” I ask him as we near the three-minute mark.

He nods, and we keep going.

“Every noble on the Continent is in residence,” Maren notes. “Maybe you should have done this with Riorson. He would have been able to lend some shadow aid.”

“He’s not exactly aware of what we’re doing,” I tell her as Imogen walks down a couple of steps in front of us. “Any chance he shows up?” I ask Tairn.

“They are out of range,” he answers. “He will not be your problem tonight.”

“Give me sixty seconds to knock out the guards, then come down,” Imogen orders, disappearing around the first curve.

“Do I get to know yet?” Maren asks.

“No,” Bodhi and Ridoc answer simultaneously.

“And how does the Empyrean feel about this?” I tap my fingers on my thigh, counting out the seconds.

“You have the full support of the Aretian riot. We will find out how the others feel in the morning.”

So we’re begging forgiveness instead of asking permission. Understood.

We start down the steps, Bodhi and me taking lead. “Xaden’s going to be pissed,” I whisper so the others don’t hear.

“Which is why you’re going to be the one to tell him when we pull it off,” he answers with a grimace. “He won’t kill you.”

We wind our way down, keeping a pace Sawyer seems comfortable with, and my chest grows tighter with every step. There should only be two guards on tonight, which is absolutely no challenge for Imogen, but the anxiety doesn’t let up until she comes into view, waiting for us on the bottom step with her arms folded.

“We have a slight problem,” she says, her mouth tensing as she steps aside. “I wasn’t sure you’d want me knocking out this particular guard.”

Mira walks into the center of the chamber and tilts her head at me in an uncanny imitation of our mother.

My stomach hits the floor. “Shit,” I mutter.

“Shit is about right.” Mira puts her hands on her hips. “And to think, I figured I was overreacting when I dismissed the guards and took their place.”

“How did you know?” I meet her in the middle of the tunnel, noting that she stands between me and the entrance to the wardstone chamber.

“Because I know you.” She levels a withering look on me, then glances over my shoulder. “You pulled that rider from his sickbed?”

“I’m the one who gets to say how ‘sick’ I am,” Sawyer counters from behind me.

“Right.” She swings her attention back to me. “You shouldn’t do this.”

I lift my chin. “Are you going to stop me?”

Her eyes narrow slightly. “Can you be stopped?”

“No.” I shake my head. “You were there when we gave our word that the fliers would be educated with the riders. If Navarre wants us, then they take all of us.”

“And you’re willing to risk the wards our mother gave her life to power to keep your word?” She lifts her eyebrow.

“You’re the one who told me this can be done.” I skirt the question as the others move to stand beside me.

“Which is something I’ll have to live with.” She looks at each rider. “You’re all aware that if we fail, the wards could fall? And if we succeed, there’s every chance we’ll be charged with treason and executed by dragon?”

“That’s not happening,” Tairn assures me with a low growl.

“I’m sorry, what?” Maren looks down the line from the right.

“Relax.” Imogen knocks her with an elbow. “Your only job is to wield. You’ll be clear of the rest.”

“We know the risks,” I tell Mira. “If the wards fall, then it looks like there’s a mass migration to Aretia, and I’m truly on a ticking clock to find Andarna’s kind. But they won’t, because you found the solution, and you’re never wrong. So I’m asking you again: Are you going to stop me?”

She sighs and drops her arms at her sides. “No, but only because I know you’ll just try again, and I might not be here to make sure it works next time. You have the best shot with both of us.” She pivots on her heel and disappears through the entrance to the ward chamber.

With Bodhi keeping watch, the six of us make our way into the narrow passage, Maren and me holding Sawyer’s crutches as Rhiannon and Ridoc shuffle sideways with Sawyer’s weight braced between them.

Only when we enter the massive chamber housing our kingdom’s wardstone do I fully comprehend what Mira had meant by us.

“This little venture tells me you’ve been hanging out with Riorson too long,” Brennan says, waiting beside Mira in front of the massive iron pillar and its eerie black flame.

Guess this is now a family affair. The corners of my mouth rise. “You’re the one leading a revolution with him. Maybe you rubbed off on me.” I keep my gaze on my siblings, ignoring everything else about the chamber in the name of self-preservation.

“And to think, you could have been wasted on the Scribe Quadrant.” He flashes a smile, but it falls quickly as he gets serious. “Henrick, you’re with Mira. She’ll help you through the process. Flier—”

“Maren Zina,” she corrects him.

“Great. Zina, you prepare to wield whatever lesser magic you’re most comfortable with. You three”—he points at Rhi, Ridoc, and me—“don’t touch anything.”

“And you?” I ask.

“I’m here in case it all goes to shit.” He glances back at the stone. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve mended it.”

I hand Sawyer his crutches, and all of us sit in one long line to begin the nail-biting process of waiting. The very future of this war will be determined in this room, just like it was a couple of weeks ago. I close my eyes to avoid the stone, but there’s no blocking the scent of the chamber or the memory of my screams.

I’ll get to see him soon. Her voice floods my head, breaking through every barrier I’ve thrown in grief’s way to keep from feeling it, and slicing into my heart like the rusty edge of a jagged blade. Live well.

“Vi?” Rhiannon wraps her arm around my shoulders.

“I couldn’t stop her,” I whisper, forcing my watery eyes open as Sawyer lifts his hands on the left. “She was right there, and I couldn’t stop her.”

“Your mother?” she asks gently.

I nod.

“I’m so very sorry, Violet,” Rhi says quietly, laying her head on my shoulder.

“I’m not even sure if I miss her,” I admit in a broken whisper, “or the chance we had at eventually…

being something. Maybe not what you and your mom have, but something."

"You can feel both." She takes my hand in hers and squeezes, and my chest lightens as we watch a spot on the top line of runes differentiating Navarre's wardstone from Aretia's bubbling outward. It's working.

Both our heads swivel right, toward Maren, and the flier stares down at the small rock in her palm, then shakes her head.

Well that's disappointing.

"Onto the next," Mira orders.

"Kind of wondering what protection we just took off," Ridoc mumbles as Sawyer lifts his hands again, sitting to our left.

Sawyer's arms begin to shake, and I continue squeezing Rhi's hand. "Maybe we pushed him too hard," I whisper to her.

The next line on the stone bulges outward, then splits for a terrifying heartbeat before melted metal oozes from the wound. Oh…crap.

"Gamlyn!" Brennan barks as Ridoc throws up his hands, hurtling a ball of ice toward the stone. It makes contact with a hiss, and Ridoc holds it there as steam bursts skyward, then fizzles and dies.

"Maybe this wasn't such a great idea—" he starts.

"Hey, everyone," Maren says.

I whip my head in her direction so fast the room spins and find the stone twirling above her hand. My breath rushes out, taking the form of a relieved laugh.

"Mira?" Brennan asks.

My sister is already walking toward the wardstone, her hands splayed open. "They're still intact. We need to be sure that Barlowe is still contained, seeing as he's our only test subject, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure the protections against dark wielders are still in place."

“We did it!” Ridoc bounces to his feet, throwing his fists in the air. “Fuck yes, Sawyer! Fuck you, Senarium—the fliers can wield! They can stay with their squads!”

I grin like a kid. In eight hours, the accord for the riot to stay will be signed, and we’ll be whole.

“What now?” Maren catches the rock.

“Now we stand trial for treason,” Sawyer manages between gulping breaths. But when our eyes meet, he’s smiling just like I am.

“No. We won’t.” My smile widens. “Maren, I need you to listen to me very carefully.”

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The next morning, my heart races and the Battle Brief room buzzes with a mixture of excitement, trepidation, and outright fear as we take our seats. Rhi and Ridoc claim the spots to my right, while Maren holds a seat empty for Cat between her and Trager to my left.

“Keep an eye on him,” Rhi orders Aaric as he escorts Kai and the other first-years down the steps at the edge of the room.

Aaric nods, and I notice Baylor and Lynx covering their backs while Sloane and Avalynn lead the way, keeping Kai protected at every angle.

“I’ve never done this without a notebook.” I brush the dust off the desktop in front of me as Cat works her way down our row.

“I’m sure our things will be sent,” Rhi says. “At least I hope they will. Guess it depends on how the Assembly takes the news that Riorson didn’t heed their wishes for the riot to return.”

“He doesn’t have to heed their wishes.” Cat slides into the seat next to Maren and pulls her braid over her shoulder. “He’s not just the heir to Aretia anymore. He’s the Duke of Tyrrendor as of eight this morning, according to my uncle.”

Thank you, Amari, it’s signed. I shift my weight, looking for a position that takes a little pressure off my lower back, and breathe deeply to try and slow my heart rate.

“You all right?” Rhi asks, her eyes narrowing on a group out of Navarre’s Fourth Wing as they fill the seats ahead of us.

“Fine.” I roll my neck. “Just didn’t get enough sleep last night and now I’m paying for it.”

“—because you took my fucking pen!” the second-year ahead of us seethes, lurching over the seat of the girl next to him. “You always take it, and I’ve had it!” He snatches the pen and settles back into his seat.

I shoot a look at Cat’s smug face. “Don’t.”

“What? I was just testing things out.” She smothers a smirk. “You said we couldn’t tell anyone, not that we couldn’t play.”

Maren snort-laughs, and I can’t help but fight my own smile. At least she’s not fucking with me, and the Navarrians do kind of deserve it.

“Welcome to Battle Brief,” Devera announces as she descends the steps to our left, and the room falls quiet. “I understand you’ve been led by Colonel Markham in my absence, but that ends today.” She reaches the raised stage at the base of the room and leans against the table. “Even if we only have one day with our flier colleagues, we will be proceeding—”

“Professor Devera!” The auburn-haired professor of the fliers, Kiandra, all but runs down the steps, and our squad shares quick glances as she conveys something to Devera behind her hand.

“Excellent,” Devera says, smiling wide. “For everyone who doesn’t know, this is Professor Kiandra, and she’ll be leading Battle Brief with me from now on, given the news that our nobles are back in active negotiation for an alliance.”

A roar of approval overpowers the disgruntled Navarrians.

“When did you tell your uncle?” I ask Cat.

“About twenty minutes ago, just like you asked,” she answers. “He works fast.”

Which means we have a matter of minutes. I drum my fingers on the desk and stare up at the inaccurate map of Navarre. Everything’s about to change.

“With that in mind”—Devera raises her voice, and we quiet down—“let’s discuss structure. To keep it easy, you stay where you have always been. If you find it awkward to serve in a squad with those who made a different choice this fall, then feel free to lodge your complaint with Malek.”

“That’s not fair!” a third-year yells out behind us. “With the addition of the fliers, Third and Fourth Wings are considerably larger, which gives them an advantage during War Games.”

“Yes.” Devera tilts her head. “Get over it. We’re not playing games anymore; we’re preparing you for war.”

“Do you think they forgot what happened two weeks ago?” Ridoc whispers.

“I think it’s possible they forgot what they had for breakfast,” Rhi replies.

“First and Second Wings will only be smaller until the rest of the flier cadets arrive from Cygnisen,” Devera continues. “At which time you will welcome them.”

“Fuck.” The guy ahead of us sinks lower in his chair.

“Next issue: we have too many wingleaders among us,” Devera continues, and I glance over my shoulder at Dain, who stiffens in his seat a few rows back with the third-years. “It has been determined that leadership shall align with the wing’s…population.” She lifts her eyebrows. “Therefore, Iris Drue, you retain leadership of First Wing, Aura Beinhaven retains Second Wing, while Third Wing remains with Lyell Stirling, and Fourth Wing will be led by Dain Aetos.”

Thank gods.

The room explodes in applause and shouts of disagreement.

“This matter is not up for discussion!” Devera’s magically amplified voice shakes the desktop, quieting the room before she continues. “If you are unsure who you report to or if you’re still in command, a full list of cadet leadership will be posted in commons this afternoon.”

The briefing room door flies open and slams into the wall so hard I hear stone crack as we all turn to face yet another commotion.

“Violet Sorrengail!” Colonel Aetos shouts from the doorway, his face a mottled shade of red as his narrowed eyes search the briefing room.

“Here.” Bracing my hands on the edges of my seat to fight a sudden wave of dizziness, I rise to stand as four riders follow Aetos in.

“Vi,” Rhiannon whispers.

“No one say a damned thing,” I reply under my breath. “I’ll be fine.”

“You are hereby charged with high treason against the kingdom of Navarre!”

Maybe not.

Chapter 8

While many preach loyalty to Hedeon above all others, especially in Calldyr Province, I find that favoring Zihnal has universal appeal. Everyone wants wisdom but needs luck.

—Major Rorilee’s Guide to Appeasing the Gods, Second Edition

Being arrested for treason doesn’t exactly come as a shock, but Colonel Aetos delivering the accusation is a blow I didn’t see coming.

“Dad?” Dain stands.

Aetos’s head swivels toward Dain, and his mouth twists into a sneer. “I have no son.”

I gasp, and hurt flashes across Dain’s face before he schools his features and straightens his shoulders. “As Cadet Sorrengail’s wingleader—”

“Request denied,” Colonel Aetos snaps.

“We can’t just sit here,” Ridoc argues quietly.

“You can and you will.” I make my way down the row and glance up at Dain. “I’m all right.”

“You’re far from all right!” Aetos growls.

The world rocks beneath my feet, and I curse my lack of sleep as I climb the steps to Aetos and the four lieutenants posted at his side. One of the women gestures toward the door, and I hold my head high as I walk by Aetos, somehow managing not to vomit when I see his rank has been raised to general.

Aetos keeps pace at my side in the hallway. “You’re as good as dead for what you’ve done.”

“I will only speak to the Senarium.”

“Good thing they’re gathered. It will make for a quick trial.” After a silent procession through the quadrant and into the main campus, Aetos escorts me past a barrage of guards and cadets from other quadrants and into the great hall, entering the room just ahead of me. “I have brought the traitor!”

He steps aside to reveal the long table set for negotiations to resume. The members of the Senarium sit to the left side again, all dazzling in their choice of clothing this morning, with the exception of the one in rider black.

Xaden turns in his seat at the end of the table and lifts his scarred brow as shadows brush across my mind. “What happened to not getting into trouble?”

“I never promised that.” I hold his gaze, noting the circles under his eyes. “You look tired.”

“Just what every man wants to hear from the person he loves.” He drums his fingers on the table, drawing my attention to a scrap of fabric in front of him—my lightning-wielder patch. “I’ve decided I’m done not knowing what you’re up to.”

“Good choice.”

“You really fucked with the wards?”

“Someone once told me the right way isn’t the only way.” I use his own words from my first year against him, and his mouth tightens.

“As you can see, we have the evidence we need to place you at the stone,” Aetos declares as he reaches the table. “I ask that the Senarium quickly pass judgment.” He glances at Xaden. “Unless your newest addition needs to recuse himself for his proximity to the traitor.”

“Remove yourself if you can’t be silent, Aetos.” The Duke of Calldyr leans back in his chair and runs a hand over his short blond beard. “You have no purview here.”

Aetos stiffens at my side, then retreats with the other riders, leaving me to face the Senarium.

“Do you have a plan, Violence?” Xaden asks, and though a muscle in his jaw flexes, the shadows in the room stay put. “I’m assuming so, since this patch’s seams look cleanly cut.”

“Has anyone reported if the capabilities of the wards were damaged beyond allowing the fliers to wield?” the Duke of Calldyr asks.

“Did you sign the accord for the riot to stay?” I ask Xaden just to be sure.

“They’re intact against dark wielders.” Xaden’s fingers still. “I wouldn’t be sitting here if I hadn’t.”

“Then I have a perfect plan.”

“How would you know?” The Duchess of Morraine turns in her seat.

“Because I would know,” Xaden replies to me alone. “We haven’t been swarmed, and Barlowe remains in our interrogation chamber. The wards are holding.” He tilts his head and gives me the same look of anticipation he does when we step on the mat to spar. “I’m eager for the show.”

“I’ll save everyone the fuss of organizing a trial and execution.” I point to the patch I cut off my uniform last night. “That’s mine. I was the one who orchestrated altering the wardstone. I’m the reason that the fliers can wield and that you now have a clear path to negotiate an alliance. You’re welcome.”

The confession is met with six pairs of raised eyebrows and one sexy-as-hell smirk. “Guess we’re not going for subtlety.”

“No time for subtlety, and no evidence to convict anyone else in case it went awry.”

“I…” The Duchess of Morraine looks to her peers, her giant ruby earrings smacking her golden-brown jawline as she swings her head back and forth. “What do we even do with that?”

“Nothing,” Xaden answers, watching me like I’m the only one in the room. “Cadet Sorrengail, and whomever she acted with, committed the crime last night, and as of this morning, every single one of you and our king signed their pardons.”

I nod.

“Brilliant, reckless woman.” His gaze heats, and I fight a smile.

“So there’s nothing we can do?” The Duchess of Elsum leans forward, her long brown tresses brushing the table. “She alters our defenses and then, what? Goes back to class?”

“It would seem so.” The Duke of Calldyr nods slowly.

“Seems the young woman pulled off quite the feat,” a new voice says.

I glance to my right, then do a double take at the woman standing in the north doorway of the hall. The silver of her intricate, armored breastplate flashes in the morning light as she walks forward, her smile crinkling the light-brown skin at the edges of her dark eyes. She wears a pair of scarlet breeches with a shortsword sheathed at her hip and a sparkling tiara atop her riotous curls, its delicacy a striking contrast to her weaponry. Queen Maraya.

“Your Majesty.” I bow my head like my father taught me.

“Cadet Sorrengail,” she says, and I look up to find her mere feet away. “I’ve heard much about the Continent’s only lightning wielder, and I am pleased to see the compliments were not spoken in hyperbole.” She glances sideways at the Senarium. “I assume she’s free to return to her duties, as surely your king will arrive at any minute to continue our negotiations.”

“There’s not a thing we can do to her.” Xaden pockets my patch, and the others slowly agree, four of them with more than a little anger in their eyes.

“Excellent.” Queen Maraya offers the Senarium a smile, then pulls me aside and lowers her voice. “Viscount Tecarus spoke of the deal you made. You truly risked your king’s wrath, your kingdom’s defenses, all to keep my fliers here?”

“Yes.” My stomach clenches. “It was the right thing to do.”

“And in return, you only asked for unfettered access to his library?” She studies me closely, but I hold her gaze.

“It’s the best on the Continent and our best hope for any historical record of how we defeated the venin centuries ago.” And how we can cure them.

“Tell me you didn’t do this for me.” Xaden’s chair creaks against the stone floor.

“I thought we promised never to lie to each other.”

“You endangered yourself—” His tone tightens.

“And I have no regrets.” The sooner he gets it through his head that I’ll do anything in my power to cure him, the easier this will be on both of us.

“Fascinating.” The queen’s smile warms. “But his is not the best. Mine is. I have thousands upon thousands of volumes secured in my summer home, and you are now welcome to any and all of them. I’ll have my steward send you a full catalog, though I warn you, we have yet to come across any such historical record.”

“Thank you.” Hope fills my chest. If I don’t find it, Jesinia will.

She nods once, then heads toward the table, effectively dismissing me.

I quickly take my leave, escaping before King Tauri—or Halden—can appear.

“This discussion isn’t over,” Xaden warns as I rush into the hallway, nearly taking out Rhi and Ridoc in the process.

“But it is for now.” I catch my balance as the door slams behind me. “What are you doing here?” Every second-year in our squad seems to have pushed their way through the guards.

“We were kind of worried they’d haul you behind the school and turn you to ash.” Ridoc rubs his hand over the tattoo of a dragon on the side of his neck.

“I’m fine. Anything we did up until this morning has been pardoned. Did you skip the rest of Battle Brief?”

“There wasn’t much to brief us on, since information is coming in from the border at a trickle. One active combat zone that they know of—” Rhi pauses, her eyes flying wide. “Vi.”

“You will face consequences!” Aetos roars from the left and I pivot, putting myself between him and my friends as he charges down the thick red carpet at us. Anger rises, swift and strong, bringing power rushing to the surface of my skin.

“Not from you she won’t.” Brennan steps through the line of guards directly in front of me and shakes his head.

“You.” Aetos recoils. “This whole time…”

“Me.” Brennan nods, and I move to his side.

“You lost.” My fingers brush the hilt of a dagger at my thigh as I glare up at the man I’d once considered a role model. “You tried to kill us at Athebyne, sent assassins after me in the fall, and even sicced Varrish on me, and I’m still here. You lost. We’re pardoned. We’re here.”

“And yet I’m the one the king appointed to take over as commanding general of Basgiath”—he gestures to the busy hall around us—“so maybe it’s you who has actually lost, Cadet Sorrengail.”

My heart gallops, the edges of my vision turn dark, and I wobble. No. Anyone but him. Anyone. I shake my head as Brennan grasps a fistful of fabric at the back of my uniform, steadying me.

“You’re unfit to sit at her desk,” Brennan snaps.

“But here I am.” He stands a bit taller. “The Senarium may abide by the pardon, but I assure you that you will not get away with altering a stone none of us fully understand—with endangering our kingdom.”

“But here I am,” I reply softly, anger quickly replacing shock. “Your threats are just threats. I’m no longer the scared first-year, unsure if I’d survive Threshing or be capable of wielding.” I take a single step in his direction. “One of my dragons is among the most powerful on the Continent, and the other is the rarest. I didn’t realize it last year or even a few months ago, but I do now: you can’t afford to kill me.”

His face—so like Dain’s—twists into a scowl.

“You can’t afford to lose either of my dragons, let alone my signet, and you sure as Malek can’t afford to lose Lieutenant Riorson’s—or should I call him the Duke of Tyrrendor?” I hold out both arms at my sides, exposing my torso. “Do your worst, but we both know I’m now beyond your reach, General.” Slowly, I let my arms fall.

“Do my worst?” Heaving breaths raise and lower his shoulders as he looks to Brennan, then behind him. “I know exactly where to strike in order to bring you to heel, cadet. Your siblings may be out of my chain of command, but your friends are not.”

My stomach dips.

“You second-years seem pretty loyal to one another.” He drags his gaze back to mine. “They’ll pay each and every time you disobey an order or step out of line, starting now.” His head tilts as he stares past me. “You want to play with matters of war? Then you won’t mind serving on the front.” He glances at Rhi. “Squad leader, every second-year under your command is hereby ordered for two days of duty at the outpost of Samara, to begin tomorrow morning.” A cruel smile curves his mouth as he addresses me. “The fighting there is…rather intense, but surely your signet will keep your squadmates alive, and two days should get you back before your dragon feels the loss of his mate.”

“Tomorrow morning?” My lips part. “But it’s at least an eighteen-hour flight for a gryphon, and they’ll need breaks.” It’s more like twenty hours total, and they’ll be exhausted by the time we get there.

“Then I guess you’d better get going. I hope to see you all return…intact.”

Chapter 9

Calling cadets into active service in times of war may only be authorized by the Commanding General of Basgiath.

—Article Eight, Section OneThe Dragon Rider’s Codex

Twenty-two hours later, the six of us report to Lieutenant Colonel Degrensi in Samara’s courtyard, bleary-eyed and swaying with bone-deep tiredness. We’re not the only ones exhausted. The lieutenant colonel has definitely seen easier days. His cheeks are gaunt, and dried blood cakes the side of his neck.

The fortress should feel familiar thanks to how many times I visited Xaden while he was stationed here in the fall, but the scene around us makes the place nearly unrecognizable. The western wall looks like a dragon crashed through it, demolishing nearly a quarter of the structure, and wounded in various states of distress line what’s left as healers in bloody smocks move between them.

“Not a dragon,” Andarna corrects me. “A wyvern.”

We flew over what remained of their burned bones a few fields away.

“Try to get some rest,” I tell her.

“I’m the only one who slept on the way here,” she argues. “And this thing itches.”

“Leave your harness on. There’s no telling how quickly we might be forced to leave.”

“I’m not wearing this when we find my family,” she grumbles.

“Then fly farther,” Tairn growls. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Lieutenant Colonel Degrensi finishes reading the orders Rhi carried, then looks up at us over the paper. “They really gave command of Basgiath to Aetos?”

“Yes, sir.” Rhi holds her shoulders straight, which is more than I can say for the rest of us.

Cat and Maren look like they’ve been through a hurricane, and Trager can’t quit yawning. Same goes for Ridoc. And after spending all night in the saddle, I’m all but leaning on him to keep upright. Every muscle in my body hurts, my hips are screaming, and my head pounds in time with my heartbeat.

“And he invoked Article Eight to send me cadets?” Degrensi glances down our line, his gaze lingering on the fliers.

“Yes, sir.” Rhi nods.

“Wonderful. Well, his intel is old.” Degrensi crumples the orders into a ball. “Fighting ended yesterday, and even if it hadn’t, I’m not apt to send cadets into battle.” He points to the gaping hole in the fortress. “The biggest wyvern crashed through as the wards came back up, but once our perimeter fell, venin didn’t need magic to get inside the post anyway. Nearly lost our power supply killing them off. We managed to repel them across the border, but the front is just over the hill.” His gaze drifts toward the fliers. “The casualties are far worse beyond the wards.”

“They always are,” Cat comments.

“Has Newhall been affected?” Maren’s face draws tight. “It’s a small village on the Stonewater River about half an—”

“I know where Newhall is,” Degrensi interrupts, clearly ready to be done with us. “As of this morning’s report, it remains standing.”

Maren’s shoulders sag, and Cat wraps her arm around her.

“What about Poromish civilians?” Trager asks. “Are you”—he flinches—“we offering them refuge?”

Degrensi slowly shakes his head. “We’re under strict orders not to allow anyone in unless something in negotiations changes, but we crossed the border and fought with your people up until the horde departed yesterday.”

“You have our gratitude,” Cat says. “Not everyone would do the same.”

He nods. “For transparency, don’t expect the others to be friendly, especially among the riders. This potential alliance isn’t overly popular.” Lieutenant Colonel Degrensi turns his attention to me. “We were all grieved to hear of the loss of your mother. She was an outstanding commander.”

“Thank you. She prided herself on it.” I adjust the straps of my pack on my shoulders to give my hands something to do.

He nods. “Do me a favor and ask that dragon of yours to stay out of sight. You are both formidable weapons, but you’re also a giant target. The enemy may see this as their opportunity to attack en masse and dispatch you both from our ranks, and we can’t afford to draw more daggers from the armory if we want to keep the wards in place. Not much we can do if he’s already been spotted, but let’s avoid additional opportunities.”

“Yes, sir,” I respond.

“I agree only as a matter of your safety,” Tairn mutters, adding something about the insolence of humans.

“Lieutenant Colonel!” a rider in dusty leathers shouts from the gate. “We need you!”

Degrensi bobs his head at the rider, then looks back at us. “Look, I don’t really care what you did to piss off Aetos; I’m too busy fighting a war to discipline cadets.” He gestures at the mess around us. “So, find whatever space you can and rack out. Get some rest. Then make yourselves useful wherever you see fit.” There’s a small but noticeable limp in his stride as he leaves us, heading for the gate.

We’re left facing more than a few questionable stares from passing soldiers and riders, some

downright hostile.

“How are we supposed to sleep knowing most of these riders would happily put knives in our backs?” Maren asks.

“We can take watches,” Trager suggests, pulling a piece of feather fluff from his light-brown hair. “Once I get some sleep, I’ll offer to help the healers, too.”

“If they’ll accept it,” Cat notes, crossing her arms when a captain in rider black glares our way from across the bailey. “They’d probably put a knife in your back in gratitude.”

“Violet?” Rhi glances my way. “You know the outpost better than any of us.”

My gaze slides toward the southwestern turret, and a tired smile tugs at my lips. Even hundreds of miles away, he’s still taking care of me and doesn’t even know it. “I know where we’ll be safe.”

• • •

Ican’t find it. Panic seizes my heart as I throw items from the wooden chest at the foot of my four-poster bed, growing more and more desperate with each minute that passes.

It has to be here.

Heat scorches the side of my face as blue flames burst through the window of my chamber, and the blast knocks me backward. I crash into the full-length mirror, and glass rains down, nicking the top of my head. I throw myself onto my hands and knees and crawl toward the chest as fire catches my curtains and screams sound in the hallway behind me.

Panic threatens to seize my muscles. I’m out of time, but I can’t leave them. They’re all I have left.

Every inch is a fight, my body refusing to obey the simple command to move, and sweat beads on my forehead as the flames spread to the linens on my bed.

“What are you doing?” someone shouts behind me as I reach the trunk, but I can’t afford the time to turn, not until I’ve found it. Pillows, an extra blanket, the books my father sent with me—I discard them all, flinging them into the fire like sacrifices as I burrow deeper into the bottomless chest.

“We have to go!” Cat sinks down to her knees beside me. “They’ve already taken the hall. We need to fly!”

“I can’t find it!” I try to yell, but it comes out nearly silent. Why can’t I scream? Rail against the cruelty, the perpetual anxiety of impending doom? “Get yourself out! I’ll follow.”

“I can’t leave you!” She grabs me by the shoulders, soot covering half her face, and fear waters her dark-brown eyes. “Don’t make me try, because I can’t.”

“You have to live.” I rip away and dig back into the chest. “He’ll choose you. I know he will. You’re the future queen of Tyrrendor, and your people need you.” She hasn’t lost her crown. She’ll fight for what’s hers.

“I need you!” she yells, then gasps and throws herself over me as heat roars against our backs. Wood crackles and breaks, and then the heat changes, coming at us from every direction.

“Just another—” My fingers fumble, then finally grasp the miniature painting, and I register their soft smiles, the playful honey-brown eyes of my family before clasping the art to my chest. “Got it!”

Cat yanks me to my feet, dragging me toward the door, and we both startle as the beams of my bed come crashing down. Embers fly, singeing my hand, and the painting slips from my grip, catching fire on its way to the ground.

“No!” I scream as Cat tugs me backward, and as the flame engulfs the portrait, it’s no longer a painting…it’s them. My parents. My family. They’re burning.

“Stop!” My throat can’t force the word out as I’m pulled away to the sound of their screams, their tears, begging me to save them. “No! No!”

I come awake and jolt upright in bed, gasping for air and blinking off the remnants of the nightmare as sweat drips down the back of my neck.

Late-afternoon sun streams in through the window, lighting the bedchamber that had been Xaden’s, the one he warded so only he and I could get through. My heart races as I glance over the sleeping faces of my squadmates. Thank the gods that Xaden used the same warding technique on this room as he had on mine at Basgiath—I’d pulled my squad through one by one.

Trager’s sleeping up against the door, using his pack for a pillow, and Ridoc is out a few feet away with his dagger mere inches from his fingertips.

“Vi?” Rhi whispers, sitting up beside me and rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. “You all right?”

I nod, spotting Maren and Cat curled with their backs against each other in the center of the room on makeshift pallets. We're all accounted for. There's no fire. No immediate danger. As much as I miss Sawyer, I'm glad he's not in harm's way. Clearly we're too close to the front for my peace of mind with dreams like that. "Just a nightmare."

"Oh." She lies back down in the spot I'd usually sleep, and I fall onto Xaden's now sweat-soaked pillow. "Basgiath? I get them sometimes, too."

"I think so." It's been months since he's slept here, but I swear I catch a hint of mint as I turn my head toward Rhi, keeping my voice low. "But Cat was there, and I was trying to find this painting of my family, but it was weird, and then they were burning." I sigh. "Which makes sense, considering my mother turned herself into an actual flame."

Rhi grimaces. "I'm sorry."

I scoff lightly, remembering the dream. "And I told Cat she had to live because she was the future queen of Tyrrendor."

Rhi's eyes widen, and she smothers a laugh with her hand. "Now that's the real nightmare."

"I know, right?" My smile slips. "What's in your nightmares when you have them?"

She smooths the piece of black silk covering her hair. "Usually, it's that you don't save Sawyer, and I can't get to him fast enough because I make the wrong call—"

"You two are not as quiet as you think," Ridoc mutters. "What time is it?"

"Probably time for us to get up," Rhi says.

The rest of the squad stirs, and we take turns in the bathing chamber before filing into the hallway, ready to make ourselves useful. A pair of riders—one wearing major rank and the other captain—approach as I shut Xaden's door, their footsteps as weary as their eyes.

"Maise says they have less than an hour," the major says, wrapping a bandage around her hand, then shoving her short blond hair out of her eyes. "Came out of nowhere."

Maise. I know that name.

"Mated to Greim," Tairn reminds me.

Right. They've been mated for decades and are able to communicate at a far longer range than Tairn and Sgaeyl.

"We're stretched too thin." A line of stitches puckers on the captain's cheek, and he shakes his head. "If they're smart, they've already evacuated Newhall."

We all step back against the wall so they can pass.

Well, all except Maren, who blocks their way. "I'm sorry, did you say Newhall?"

"Yes," the captain replies, looking at Maren like he's tasted something sour.

"Why is it being evacuated?" Maren rushes, her brow furrowing.

The officers share a knowing look, and the rest of us come off the wall in front of the pair as Cat quickly crosses behind Trager to reach Maren. "The area is under attack. It's odd for venin to target such a small village, but scouts reported smoke."

Maren inhales sharply, and Cat hooks her arm through her elbow.

"You have people there?" The major's tone softens, pity in her gaze.

Maren presses her lips between her teeth and nods.

"It's where her family fled," Cat answers. "It's not more than half an hour from here. Are we flying?"

"We?" The captain looks at each of us—pausing at my braid—before addressing Cat. "We are running on little to no sleep and have already lost one rider this week. Half our riot is patrolling to the north and the other half is pushing burnout, so as harsh as it may sound"—he shoots the major a look I can't quite decipher—"the village is too small to risk any more casualties to the unit."

My breath abandons me.

"So we just leave them to die?" Trager's voice rises. "Why? Because they're Poromish?"

“Not because they’re Poromish. Because we can’t help.” The major’s words grow shorter. “Not all of us wield lightning.” She glances at me. “If we want to save the towns, the cities, the denser areas of population, then an unfortunate part of war is knowing we’ll lose some of the villages. If you don’t pick up strategic concepts in your third year, then you’ll certainly learn fast once you graduate.” The pair walks around Maren and Cat, their footsteps heavy as they depart.

“If any of us are still alive by the time they graduate…” The captain’s voice fades.

“My family’s there,” Maren whispers, her face crumpling. “Why didn’t my parents go south when Zolya fell? They would have been safe in Cordyn. Or they could have gone back to Draithus.”

“Shh.” Cat rubs Maren’s arm. “I’m sure they’ll get out.”

Maren shakes her head violently. “What if they’re already dead?”

My stomach churns as I look to Rhi. “Tairn and I can make that flight faster than half an hour if we break from the squad.”

“It’s not like we haven’t seen battle,” Cat adds. “We fought our way out of Cliffsbane.”

Rhi stiffens. “Aetos invoked Article Eight, so we’re legally clear, but there are so many unknowns,” she whispers to herself. “Number of venin? Wyvern? But the civilians…”

“Look, it’s only a fight if we make it one.” Ridoc glances at the fliers. “Narrow the scope of the mission. We extract Maren’s family. We save as many civilians as we can. We get out.”

“Without knowing what we’re up against, we can’t just—” Rhi starts.

“We defended Basgiath,” Cat snaps.

Rhi’s mouth snaps shut.

If it were Mira and Brennan in danger, I’d go, especially with that nightmare so fresh in my mind, but there’s a reason I’m not the squad leader and Rhi is. “Vote,” I suggest. “I get it—ordering us into a war zone could be catastrophic and we’re just cadets, so vote. That’s what we did at Resson.”

None of us mention that Liam and Soleil didn’t come home.

Rhi nods. “All in favor—” Every hand goes up, including hers. She sighs. “Well, Degrensi did tell us to make ourselves useful. Let’s go be of use.”

Chapter 10

Weather is the one great equalizer in battle, equally detrimental or favorable to both sides given the conditions. Without our wielders swaying that element to our advantage, we are at its mercy.

—Tactics, a Modern Guide to Aerial Combat by Major Constance Cara

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Forty minutes later, the sun disappears as Tairn and I drop between the snow-tipped ridgelines, descending thousands of feet into the warmer valley that houses the Stonewater River. The sun always sets so early this time of year. Power hums in my veins, ebbing and flowing with every heartbeat. I’d almost forgotten how wild magic feels beyond the wards, how accessible. Tairn’s power seems endless, deeper than the oceans I’ve never crossed, wider than the vast sky above us.

“Maise saw us depart,” Tairn warns, tucking his wings. My stomach rises as he plummets, following the terrain at a nauseating speed. “She’s relaying an order to return immediately.”

“Can you ignore her?” We’re easily five minutes ahead of the other dragons and ten ahead of the gryphons, who travel with Andarna despite my pleas for her to stay behind.

“I do not answer to Maise.” He levels out over the river, a notable tailwind helping to maintain his speed. His wings beat so close to the rapids that I half expect to feel the splash of water as we curve around the bend. In a few months, this river will be the most treacherous on the Continent with spring runoff, adding to the region’s already unpredictable weather compliments of the abrupt change in altitude.

Smoke rises in thick plumes ahead of us, joining the storm clouds while simultaneously smothering the village beneath. My heart jolts with a rush of adrenaline and dread. “Ahead.”

“Yes, I, too, have eyes. We’re five minutes out.” He tips right to fit through a bottleneck in the water-carved canyon, and my weight shifts, the belt of my saddle keeping me in place.

Once we're through, I rip off my gloves, shove them into my right front pocket, then scan both sides of the raging river for signs of life. "I need you to slow down. I can't tell if those are people or trees."

"You ask for speed and then complain when I provide it." But he slows as the landscape shifts into the high plains.

"This is the only logical path they'd take to—" I spot a line of civilians hiking toward us on the southern bank of the river. "There!"

"I have relayed to Feirge. The gryphons and Andarna will stop there first as planned," Tairn tells me, then picks up speed again. "One minute. Prepare yourself. The pressure is dropping. We fly toward a storm."

Sure enough, my ears pop as I shove my wrist through the leather strap that will keep the conduit secure. Quickly, I unbutton my flight hood, letting the warmer wind rip it from my face for the sake of visibility as we fly toward the smoke-and-flame-engulfed village. Civilians flee from a gate in the western wall, and the acrid scent of smoke fills my lungs, growing more pungent with each beat of Tairn's wings.

A shape breaks through the pillar of smoke—

"Wyvern!" I grasp the conduit in my left hand, then throw open the door to Tairn's power, increasing the flow from a trickle to a rush. It envelops me, fire streaking through my veins, embers burning in my bones as the conduit glows, siphoning off the excess.

"Do not channel more than you wield!" Tairn warns as the wyvern flies straight for us, its gray, leathery wings riddled with holes.

"I'm fine." If I miss the first time, those fetid teeth will be in reach of Tairn. I force myself upright against the wind, my core tightening to keep me steady as I lift my right hand, then take aim and release the power with a snap.

Lightning flashes, illuminating the clouds above for less than a heartbeat before tearing through the sky and striking the wyvern in the chest. The beast screams as it falls, and Tairn passes so closely overhead that I catch the scent of charred flesh.

There's no time for relief as two more burst through the smoke.

We're outnumbered, and while Tairn is bigger, they are faster.

“High ground,” Tairn warns before banking right and climbing, putting the village behind us.

I turn as far as the belt on my saddle will allow and raise my hand, welcoming the burn as energy gathers within me, but— “They’re on us!”

Too close to strike without endangering Tairn.

The larger wyvern’s enormous jaw opens, revealing bloodstained teeth, and its tongue curls as it lunges with a burst of speed. “Tairn!”

Tairn dips his wings at an angle, catching the wind, and I hurtle forward in the seat at the sudden decrease in speed as he swings his massive tail. Bone cracks, blood spurts, and the wyvern spins off to the right, missing the lower half of its jaw.

I can’t pivot fully, but I take aim at what I can see of the one still pursuing us, then unleash with a crack…and miss.

“Fuck.” I reach—

“If you remove that belt, I will unseat you over the river and let your meager gods sort you out,” Tairn warns, then banks left, giving me the perfect view.

I release another strike, guiding it with the motion of my hand, and it hits true, severing the wyvern’s head from its neck. “Got it!”

Fuck yes.

But unless those three wyvern are on a scouting patrol—unlikely, given the flaming village—there has to be a creator nearby. I face forward and lean into the turn, casting my focus downward. The demarcation line is clear this high above the village. Half is devoid of color, drained of all its magic, and in the center of the village stands a single figure in flowing dark robes, her light hair—silver?—whipping in the wind.

It’s her. The dark wielder from Jack’s cell. My grip tightens on the conduit.

She looks toward us, lifts her hand, and wiggles her fingers as if waving. A sick feeling squeezes my stomach. “I think…she was expecting us.”

This is a trap.

And we flew right into it. My heart drops at the realization, but it doesn't change the fact that Maren's family is in danger.

"Above!" Tairn bellows, and I look up as two wyvern emerge from the swirling storm system.

I lift my hand, but there's no time. They're already here.

Tairn punches his tail forward, underneath us, swinging his body in a way I've never experienced, and I fall backward, my stomach lodging in my throat as the ground takes the place of the sky and the strap pulls tight across my thighs, holding me upside down long enough for my heart to pound in my ears twice.

Snap. Bone fractures, and Tairn rolls right, dragging the broken-necked corpse of a wyvern with us, then releasing it once we level. I force my stomach back where it belongs and prepare to strike the other as it lunges for us.

It snaps its jaws, teeth clashing mere feet from Tairn's shoulder as it misses, cutting at least two years off my life. I extend my arm—

"Do not!" Tairn orders, and a second later, brown scales consume my field of vision as Aotrom clasps the wyvern's head between his teeth and bites as we pass.

The wind roars like a beast, blocking out any other sound, and Tairn banks hard, whipping himself back around. My face contorts into a grimace at the force my body absorbs with the maneuver, and I fight to remain conscious as we turn toward the battle.

Aotrom's tail curves up, the poisonous barb jabbing into the belly of the wyvern— I blink. A scorpiontail?

It's not Aotrom.

"Chradh," Tairn explains as the wyvern falls from the dragon's grip.

"What the fuck is Garrick—"

"Tornado!" Tairn warns a second before a wall of wind hits hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs and drags us into its swirling vortex.

We're flung like a rag doll, and the roar of the storm vibrates every bone in my body. Tairn snaps his wings shut, and I hold fast to the pommels and duck my head as debris flies by, terror locking my muscles as we're thrown round and round and round as though we weigh nothing.

Oh Malek, I am not ready to meet you.

"Violet!" Andarna shouts.

"No!" Tairn bellows as we're spun to a near vertical position.

"Stay back!" I shriek, and fear burns through my bones like acid as we're ripped outward by centrifugal motion. She can't get caught in this. It has every chance of killing us and will damn sure take her life.

We're flung out of the storm like a projectile, hurtling backward through the air toward what I think is a mountainside. Tairn opens his wings in a burst, slowing our speed from meteoric to lethal in a move so sudden, my head whips backward and my ears ring. His roar shakes my ribs as he snaps his wings shut and contorts his body in an attempt to twist.

His side hits first, the collision stunning me breathless and knocking boulders loose around us with a cracking sound. Something slams into my knee and Tairn's wings snap over me a moment before I hear a second thud of impact.

The bond goes dark.

NO.

"Tairn!" I scream, terror locking every muscle, stealing every thought but one: he can't be gone.

We fall down the ridge in a graceless, limp skid. Deprived of sight, I can only hear the grate of rock against scale, feel the jarring hits as we crash through obstacles and continue downward.

"Tairn!" I try again, mentally grasping for him, but there's…nothing.

"Violet," Andarna cries. "I can't feel him!"

"Stay back!" I repeat as we fall down and down and down. Is there a cliff beneath us?

I should have heeded Tairn's warning about the storm. Is he all right? Has he…

"Don't think like that!" she wails.

My heart thunders a staccato beat as we plummet, and I throw my hands from the pommels and spread them over his scales. I can't feel him breathing, but that doesn't mean he isn't. He has to be all right. I'd feel it if he wasn't, right? Panic fights to close my throat. This isn't how he ends, how we end.

Liam only had minutes after Deigh ceased breathing, but he knew.

"Choose to live," I beg Andarna in a rush. "You're the only one of your kind, you have to live. No matter what happens to us."

Oh gods, Xaden.

"Stay with me," she pleads, her voice breaking. "You both have to stay."

We free-fall for the length of a heartbeat, my stomach rising, and I prepare for my final breath.

Earth claims us once more in a rough embrace, and this time, we grind to a stop.

Tairn's wings fall open, and I'm left dangling at a ninety-degree angle to the ground, gasping dust-filled air. He's fallen onto his side.

I can't see his head from this angle, so I drop any semblance of a shield and fully reach for him. There's a glimmer of thread where our bond should be, but it's enough to flood my system with hope as something crashes behind me. A glimmer means he isn't dead. My own heartbeat means he can't be—

His chest shudders and his breaths begin a deep, steady pattern.

Thank you, gods.

"He's breathing," I tell Andarna.

"Sorrengail!" Footsteps race toward me.

“Here!” I reply, my abs straining to keep position while I fight with the belt of my saddle.

Garrick’s chest heaves as he appears ten feet beneath me, his hood blown back and blood dripping from the right corner of his hairline. “You’re alive.” He braces his hands on both knees and leans over, and I can’t tell if he’s catching his breath or going to be ill. “Thank you, Dunne. Tairn?” He looks up, giving me a quick appraisal and blanching.

“Knocked out… What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Your knee is a fucking mess.”

I glance down at my leg, and a scream works its way up my throat as the agony hits, like it waited until I could see exactly how fucked I am to make itself known. My flight leathers are torn at my right knee, and my mouth waters, bile rising quickly as I realize my kneecap isn’t where it’s supposed to be. Searing pain hurtles up my leg and spine, stealing logical thought as it consumes me, coming in waves that match my heartbeat.

“Is it broken?” Garrick asks.

Seconds tick by as I concentrate solely on pushing the pain back into a box I can manage, then force my toes to move one by one. “I think. Just. Dislocated. Can’t fix it.” Nausea rolls through me with every breath. “At this angle.”

He nods. “Drop, and I’ll catch you. We’ll get you sorted on the ground.”

“Chradh?” I ask, getting a firm grip on the belt. My weight is holding the damned buckle closed.

“He’s slowly coming to.” Garrick looks back over his shoulder. “Stubborn ass turned and took the impact on his stomach. Saved my life, but an outcropping halfway down knocked him out temporarily.”

That must be what happened to Tairn. That second impact I heard was his head.

Shit. The silver-haired venin is still out here, and both dragons are as good as defenseless without us, at least until the others arrive. “Drop me, and I’ll kick you in the face.” I grit my teeth through the pain. I’m not dying today, and neither is Tairn.

“Let’s be honest. You’re not kicking anyone with that knee.” He lifts his arms up, and I’m filled with the most illogical longing for Xaden to be standing in his place. “Come on, Violet. Trust me.”

I heave up, pushing against the pommels to shift my weight, then wrench the strap through the buckle and fall like a stone. The scream I'd held back rips free as he catches me, the world erupting in shades of red pain at the collision.

"Do you want me to put it back in?" he asks, holding me as carefully as he can.

I nod, and he quickly sets me on my feet and crouches in front of me, holding on to my waist to keep me upright. The scabbards of the swords he wears strapped to his back drag through palm-size hail stones to scrape the rocky ground.

"Extend it slowly," he orders, keeping his hazel eyes on my knee. I turn my head, biting into the collar of my jacket to keep from screaming again as I straighten my leg. "This won't be pleasant. I'm so sorry," he says as he slides my kneecap back into place.

"Don't be," I manage to gasp, the pain immediately sliding to a level where I can at least think somewhat properly. "Wrap is in my pack." The rhythmic sound of Tairn's breathing calms my heartbeat, but I can't see anything beyond his dark scales to my left and hunks of granite to our right with us all but wedged up against the mountainside.

He retrieves the fabric, then holds me steady as I do my best to stabilize the joint. Pain flares as I test my weight on the limb, but it's miniscule compared to what could happen to Tairn if we don't start moving, so I tie off the fabric and call it good. It'll do until I can get to a healer or Brennan—but we need to get out of here alive first.

"You're good at that," he says. Dipping down, he slings an arm around my upper back, and I throw mine over his shoulder.

"Lots of practice." We make our way beside Tairn's back, careful not to step on his wings, and finally clear his tail as the tornado winds its way eastward. "Your head is bleeding right above your scar from Resson."

"Good. Hate to damage the other side of my perfect face," he jokes. "Don't worry about me. It's nothing a couple of stitches won't fix."

"The others approach," Andarna says. "They do not know Chradh is with you, and I have not told them."

The Brown Scorpiontail blocked out his riot?

"Tell them to go for Maren's family first. You stay right where you're at until we know what's going on."

There's a definite grumble in her response as I stagger forward with Garrick's help, taking a central position between Tairn and Chradh, who looks like he might be missing a few scales along his jaw.

"The others are on their way," I tell Garrick. "And I'm pretty sure that venin knew we were coming."

"That's…great." He grimaces. "I've flown through some shit, but never been through a tornado before," Garrick says, scanning the horizon. We're at least a mile south of the village.

"Me, either." The smoke rises in a steady column again above the town. I reach for Tairn's power, but as expected, the scorching Archives I've come to depend on sputter with darkness. "Want to tell me what you're doing here?"

"They made it." Garrick tenses and pointedly looks toward the western end of the village as Feirge and Aotrom cross the moonlight. Kira, Daja, and Trager's gryphon, Sila, follow soon after, all of them bearing their riders and fliers respectively. "Maren's family, right? That's what Major Safah relayed."

"That's why I'm here. You're supposed to be with Xaden." There's no point confirming what he already knows. "Eight hours away."

"Yeah, well, the second he heard you were charging off into danger, he became…unreasonable." A muscle in Garrick's jaw ticks, and I pull my arm from his shoulder so he can stand straight, shifting my weight to relieve the pressure from my right knee as much as possible. "I've never seen him like that." Garrick shoots a worried look my way. "Ever. I don't even want to think about what he would have done if he'd been out here beyond the wards, because I thought he was going to rip the stones from the wall. He's always prided himself on control—he has to when he wields that much power—and I'm telling you, he lost it when he heard you were crossing the border, Violet. He's…not himself."

My chest tightens. He'd been annoyed, even angry when I flew for Cordyn with my siblings a few months ago, but hadn't come close to losing it. "Because Aetos sent us to—" The words die on my tongue as I process what he said. "He knew I was crossing the border? Maise." I end on a whisper, staring up at the side of Garrick's face. "How did you get here?"

"It's not important." He draws a sword with his left hand.

"Maise saw us leave maybe forty minutes ago, and you're already here. You're a wind-wielder, and there's no fucking way you pushed a hundreds-of-miles-an-hour tailwind at Chradh, so how did you get here?" My voice rises with my temper, and lightning strikes twenty feet in front of us, charring the ground as thunder booms simultaneously.

I startle, then wince as my knee cries at the sudden movement.

“Damn, Sorrengail, you didn’t have to—” he starts.

“I didn’t.” I shake my head.

“I did.”

Our heads whip right, and the silver-haired venin walks toward us, her purple robes billowing in the breeze. She doesn’t bother to look at Tairn as she passes mere yards in front of his hind claws, just keeps those eerie red eyes pinned on us. On me.

Wait. She did…what? Lightning?

Blood drains from my face and I throw up my shields, drawing on Andarna’s power.

Holy Dunne, she wielded lightning. But venin aren’t supposed to have signets…let alone mine.

Dread pins my heart to the ground, but my hands are fast as I unsheathe and fling two daggers at her chest.

She waves her hand left and right, and the knives fall mid-flight. “Is that any way to thank me?”

Fuck. I should have brought the mini crossbow Maren gave me.

“Thank you for what, exactly?” Garrick raises his sword and moves to my side as I reach for Tairn’s power again, finding a dim hum.

“Now wouldn’t be a bad time to manifest a second signet,” I tell Andarna as the dark wielder approaches. My heart thunders like a drum. All the venin has to do is palm the earth and the four of us will be desiccated in seconds.

“As if I control how you use my power?” Andarna counters.

Second signet. My gaze darts toward Garrick, but a glance is all I can afford with the dark wielder sauntering toward us.

“Not killing you, of course.” The dark wielder cocks her head to the side and runs her gaze over

me in blatant appraisal, then pauses about ten feet away. The scarlet veins beside her eyes remind me of a masquerade mask topped by the faded tattoo on her forehead, and the red glow around her irises is ten shades brighter than Jack's. A Sage, probably…maybe even a Maven, and were it not for the physical signs of her lost soul, she'd be stunningly beautiful, with high cheekbones and a full mouth, but her skin's eerily pale. "Though I must say I'm disappointed you were so easily lured from your wards." She tsks at me. "Shame the girl's family raised weapons at me, or they might have lived." She shoots a warning glance at Garrick, but he doesn't lower his sword.

The girl's family… My hands curl into fists.

"You killed Maren's family?" Rock and ice crunch under my boots as I take two steps toward her. "To lure me?" Anger curdles my stomach.

"Only the parents." She rolls her eyes. "I left the boys as a sign of goodwill, though you can't say the same about my wyvern, can you?"

"Goodwill?" I shout. Maren's going to be devastated.

"Violet," Garrick warns, but he keeps with me step for step.

"Careful with your tone, lightning wielder." The dark wielder flicks her wrist, and Garrick rises in the air in a nauseating reenactment of every one of my nightmares. His sword drops to the ground, and he scrambles for his throat. "You, I'm curious about. I'll even admit to wanting, considering all that power, not to mention being an effective leash. But him?" She shakes her head, and Garrick begins to kick.

Leash. That's exactly what Jack called me. She knows about Xaden.

"Let him go!" I draw another dagger and shove every hint of fear aside. Nothing's happening to Garrick on my watch. "This might not kill you, but it will hurt like hell."

"Let's not compare weapons." She reaches for a knife sheathed in the belt of her gauzy purple robe and reveals just enough of its green tip to seize my breath for a heartbeat. "Our paths are too intertwined to begin with such hostility. I know: you answer a single question and I'll return the walker to the ground. That seems a civil start to our relationship, don't you think, Violet?"

"Ask it." I feel Andarna hovering along our bond, alert and hopefully nowhere near us. "Warn the others."

"They're coming." Frustration sharpens her words.

“You prize his friend’s life over information. Interesting.” She shoves the knife back into its sheath. “I’m Theophanie, by the way. Seems only right that you know my name, seeing as I know everything about you, Violet Sorrengail.”

Fucking awesome. “Because of Jack?” It’s the only logical explanation.

She shrugs in a dismissive gesture that reminds me of the Duchess of Morraine. “Bonding one dragon is…enviable. All that power just given to you.” Her mouth tightens. “But two is unheard of. Aren’t you the luckiest girl on the Continent? Or maybe that’s me, being close by when your morningstartail was spotted.”

“Is that really your question?” My fingernails cut into my palms as Garrick’s kicks become more desperate.

“Just an observation.” Her gaze flicks toward Garrick. “For good faith.” She turns her hand and Garrick crashes to the ground beside me, wheezing as he draws breath. “Now tell me, which chose you first? The one who gifted you the power of the sky? Or the irid?”